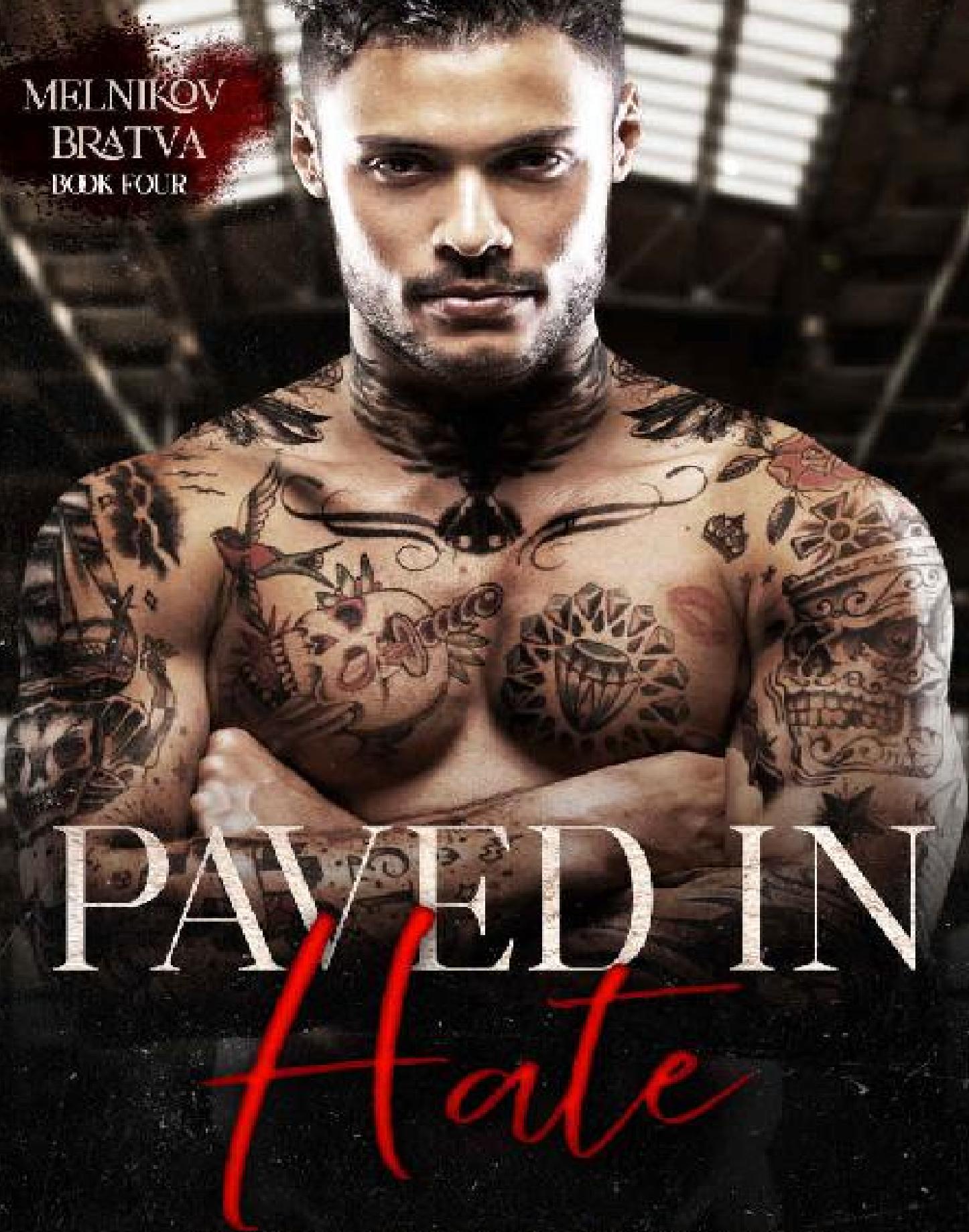


MELNIKOV
BRATVA
BOOK FOUR



PAVED IN

Hate

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE
SONJA GREY

Paved in Hate

A Dark Mafia Romance

Melnikov Bratva

Book 4

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Sonja Grey

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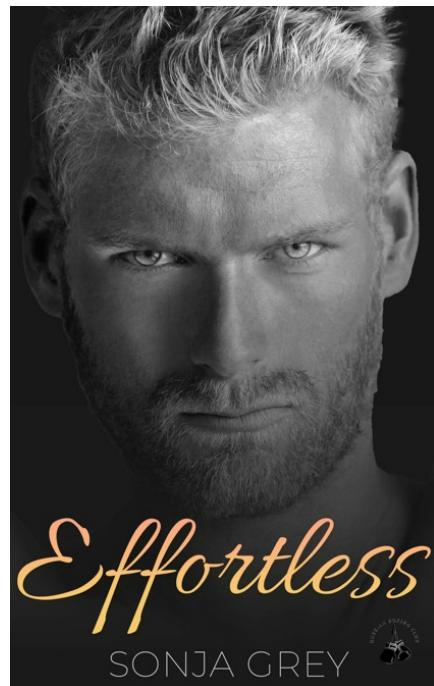
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Also by Sonja Grey

All series are interconnected, unless noted, and can be read as stand-alones, but they're more enjoyable if you read them in order.

All are in KU!

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Devil from Moscow

Bratva Devil

Filthy Devil

Melnikov Bratva

(Should be read in order)

Paved in Blood

Paved in Venom

Paved in Rage

Paved in Hate

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Blurb

**First comes hate,
second comes a forced marriage,
and third comes bringing Vitaly Melnikov to his knees.**

Vitaly:

I'm used to women wanting me, not hating me, but my wife looks at me like she's hoping my next breath will be my last. Our marriage wasn't by choice, but when I vowed to be her husband, I meant it.

I never go back on my word, so we're married whether she likes it or not. At least for the moment.

The plan was for me to stay married until we got what we needed from her brothers.

As long as I don't touch her, we can annul this unfortunate blip on my bachelor timeline.

The problem is she looks sweet, and she smells sweet, and then I risk everything and take a taste.

Now I'm addicted and in way over my head.

Katya:

My brother is head of the Lebedev Bratva, and he's just offered me to Vitaly Melnikov. It's a marriage that will unite our families, but it's not what I want.

I don't care how incredibly good looking my new husband is—I don't trust him.

I tell myself I can resist him, but the man is talented in ways I never dreamed, and my restraint is slipping fast.

Before I know it, I'm begging for more and falling hard for the husband I swore I'd never want.

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Trigger Warning

This book contains all the elements you would expect from a dark mafia romance.

This is not a fade-to-black book...like at all. Expect dark, on-page content.
This book is not recommended for sensitive readers.

This story does contain physical violence, abusive relationships (not between the MMC and FMC!!), as well as graphic violence, explicit sex scenes, including anal, and mature language.

Sex trafficking plays a big part in this entire series.

The men I write are fiercely loyal and protective. They will kill anyone (seriously, anyone!) who dares to hurt the women they love, but they're big softies for their women. They tend to fall hard and fast, and there will never be any cheating in my books!

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Prologue

Vitaly
25 Years Old
Alina's 18th Birthday

“Vitaly!”

I turn my head and laugh when I see Alina barreling towards me. She jumps in my arms right before I wrap her in a hug and spin her around like she's still ten years old. Her laughter fills the room, and when I set her down, she claps her hands and then holds them out.

“What'd you get me?”

“Wow, presumptuous, Alina.”

She laughs and wiggles her fingers. She's already seen the bag I'm carrying, and she knows there's no way in hell I wouldn't get her a birthday present. Even though we're not related by blood, she's been a little sister to me my whole damn life.

I hold the bag out and lift a brow. “Who's your favorite brother?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “You know I don't have favorites. I love you all.”

I laugh and roll my eyes right back at her. “Please, we all know who you love the most.”

Her cheeks blush as she looks away. “Not like anything's going to come of that,” she mutters.

I dangle the bag in front of her. “Don't lose hope, little sis. You're eighteen now.”

When she sees the label on the bag, her whole damn face lights up. “You didn’t.”

“You want to change your answer about who your favorite brother is?” I tease.

She’d begged me to take her shopping a few weeks ago, and I’d agreed because it’s a pretty damn good way to pick up women, but instead of getting laid, I’d been dragged from store to store while Alina had drooled over dresses that her older brother would’ve killed me if I’d bought for her. He’s still going to kill me because I went back this morning and got her the small, black dress she’d been eyeing. You only turn eighteen once, so why the hell not?

I laugh and hand her the bag. “Just make sure to tell Roman that Lev’s the one who bought it for you.”

Her blue-green eyes are impossibly wide as she reaches in and pulls out the black dress like she’s almost afraid to touch it. When I hand her the matching black heels, she squeals and gives a small jump.

“I dare Matvey to not notice you in this,” I say, giving her a wink. Checking my watch, I put the shoebox in her hand and wave her off. “Better hurry. They’ll be here soon.”

Before she runs off, she pulls me in for a tight hug. “Thanks, Vitaly,” she whispers.

I kiss the top of her head and hug her back. “Don’t thank me yet. Roman’s going to have a heart attack.”

She laughs and runs down the hall to the room she always stays in when she’s here. She still splits her time between the penthouse the five of us share and her mom’s apartment, but she’s been slowly spending more and more time here. Roman worries about her safety. We’ve been climbing the ranks in the Safronov Bratva, and people are starting to take notice. I can tell he’s torn between wanting to keep her here nonstop so he can watch her better and wanting her at a safe distance so she won’t be associated with us. We’re all very protective of her, and as of right now, no one in the Bratva even knows Roman has a sister. We’d all like to keep it that way.

Danil is a genius with computers, and he’s been stealing us money for years. He’s also been leaving a paper trail of our whereabouts that would confuse anyone. The penthouse we live in is listed under a fake name. On paper, the five of us live in an apartment about thirty minutes away and Alina is completely hidden. This world isn’t kind to women. We know that

better than most, and we've always done everything we can to keep her safe and protected.

When the door opens, I turn just in time to see Roman and Danil step in with a handful of balloons, a large birthday cake, and several bags of food. Lev and Matvey are a few steps behind, each carrying an armful of presents.

"Where is she?" Roman asks, setting the large cake on the counter while Danil ties the balloons to the back of a chair.

I decide to play dumb. "Getting ready, I think." Walking over to help myself to a bag of chips, I snack while they set out the gifts and put the ice cream away.

"Don't worry, Vitaly, we've got this covered," Lev says as he stacks the presents and then scrubs a hand over his jaw, toying with the lip ring while he eyes everything.

I ignore the sarcasm and smile. "I thought so. You guys are doing a great job."

He laughs and steals the bag of chips from me. I'm just about to grab it back when I hear Matvey let out a low "Jesus Christ."

Looking up, I see Alina standing in the doorway. She's wearing the dress and heels I bought her, and she looks stunning. Her long, dark hair falls around her shoulders, and her big eyes are focused on a very uncomfortable looking Matvey. She's nervous. I can see it in the way she shifts her weight and fidgets with the bottom of her short dress.

"You look beautiful," I tell her. My words break the silence, but they don't do shit to cut the tension. I walk over to her and look at the four men who look less than thrilled at my gift. Giving a soft laugh, I hold up my hands to stave off their fury. "She's eighteen," I say, trying to reason with them.

"They look really angry," Alina whispers.

"For the love of god, whatever you do, don't bend over," I whisper back, making her laugh.

"You can't wear that," Roman says.

"Why not?" Alina's starting to get pissed. She hikes a hand on her hip and stands her ground. "Vitaly's right. I'm eighteen now, and it's just a dress."

"A really fucking short one," he counters.

"She's just in the apartment," I remind him.

"For now," she says, and I look over at her. I recognize the mischievous tilt of her lips. I know that smile well, and I know I'm not going to like what she says next. "I want to go out for my first official drink."

"That was not part of the plan," I remind her.

She lifts a dark brow. "It is now." Turning back to her brother, she then eyes me, Lev, and Danil, the three men who might as well be blood related, until finally resting her eyes on Matvey, the man she's been in love with her whole life. "I'm eighteen. I want to go and get a drink, and I'll be safe as long as I'm with all of you." She gives us all another once-over. "Or I can just go alone if you'd prefer that."

"Not a chance in hell," Matvey says, and with his gravelly voice it sounds a lot like a growl.

Hearing that makes her smile as she gives a soft nod. "Okay then. After presents and cake, we're going to get a drink."

Roman shakes his head. "What the hell just happened?"

I laugh and smack him on the back. "Your sister just put us all in our place."

"This is a bad idea," Matvey mutters, eyes still locked on Alina in her small, black dress.

I'd smack him on the back, too, but he hates to be touched, so instead I just say, "We won't let anything happen to her. She won't leave our sight for even a second."

He grunts, and I take it as his agreement to the plan before I go to grab a plate of food. I eat while Alina starts opening her presents. She's always gotten giddy at gifts. Even when we were all dirt poor and could barely afford anything, she'd get so excited about the smallest of gifts, always acting like it was the best thing she'd ever seen. Even now, she's just as excited about the diamond and ruby earrings Roman got her as she was about the bookmark he bought her when she was six and that's all he could afford. She still uses that damn thing, too.

"I love them," she tells him, holding them up to her ears before giving him a big hug.

He hugs her back and then takes photos while she opens up the rest. Danil's present is a new laptop, Lev's gift is the new gaming system she's been talking about, because the girl's a bit of a gamer, and when she gets to Matvey's gift, she takes her time. Blushing, she runs her hands over the

wrapped box like she wants to savor the moment. When she finally tears it open, she lets out a soft gasp and stares up at him.

“You didn’t,” she whispers.

Matvey just shrugs and tries to hide his smile. Alina is the only one who gets full smiles from Matvey.

“What’s the mysterious gift?” I ask, leaning over while I pop another chip in my mouth.

She holds up the set of books with a huge smile on her face. “I can’t believe you found them,” she squeals, opening up the first book and then letting out another gasp. “They’re signed?”

Matvey laughs.

“She signed them to me? How did you get these?”

“I went to her website and placed an order and explained that you were her biggest fan in all of Russia,” Matvey says.

Alina strokes the set of fantasy books like they’re the most precious things in the world.

When it’s obvious this could last a while, Matvey gently nudges her foot. “You still have another one to open.”

She takes the box he hands her, and this time when she opens it, she lets out an even louder squeal, holding up the red hoodie while her mouth hangs open.

“You’re letting me have it?”

Matvey laughs. “You’re always asking to borrow it anyway.”

She holds it up, and even though it’s way too big for her, it’s obvious she’s planning on living in it. It’s Matvey’s favorite hoodie, and I’m a little surprised he’s willing to part with it. When he was fifteen, he was in a fire and almost died trying to save his mom and sister. I heard him screaming from my own apartment and ran in to get him. I managed to pull him out, but that fire damaged him more than just the third-degree burns it left on him. My own hands carry the scars, but it’s nothing compared to what he endured. Matvey hasn’t been the same since that night, but he’s most like his old self when he’s with Alina. It’s the only time I ever really catch sight of the person he was before the fire.

“Maybe you should put it on now,” Matvey says, giving a soft laugh at the look on her face.

“I’m wearing more clothes than the women you guys usually surround yourselves with,” Alina says, and it’s a fair point, so I don’t say shit.

"They're not you," Matvey says, "and they're not surrounding *me*."

He looks over at me, and I laugh. "Guilty. What can I say? I attract a crowd."

Alina rolls her eyes at me. "Well, not tonight. I want one night with you guys. All of us together, just like it used to be."

"Don't worry, Alina," Lev says, putting the candles in the cake. "It's just family tonight."

She smiles and then laughs when we all sing to her. Before she blows out the candles, she darts a quick glance at Matvey and then closes her eyes to make a wish. I watch Roman, wondering how he's going to take all this. He knows about Alina's crush on Matvey, we all do, but she's older now, and there's no denying that things are going to be changing. His face is calm, though, when I look at him. If it was anyone else, he'd probably already have his gun out, but this is Matvey, and we all know he'd never do anything to hurt her.

After stuffing ourselves with more cake than is probably wise, Roman tries one more time to convince Alina that staying in would be way more fun. No surprise to anyone, she's not budging. She waits while the rest of us get ready and grab our weapons. We don't flaunt what we do around her, but she's not stupid. She knows we're involved with the Safronov Bratva, but she has no idea how deeply involved we are or that we have plans to take over one day.

When everyone's ready, we decide on a nightclub that's a few streets over. It's geared for a younger crowd and not one that we typically hang out at, so hopefully we can avoid running into anyone we know. We pile into a dark SUV and make the short drive. The club is packed, and when we step inside, we quickly form a tight circle around Alina. Roman pushes his way through, leading us straight to the bar. When a group of women in dresses that are even smaller than the one I bought Alina come walking over, I'm already holding up a hand to stop them.

"Sorry, ladies, we're not interested tonight," I tell them. The one in front gives me a pouty look and juts her chest out even more. I sigh, but a promise is a promise, so I shake my head and wave them off again. I turn to see Alina giving me a big smile.

"Thanks, Vitaly."

"You owe me, Alina. She wasn't wearing panties."

Alina laughs and looks at the woman who'd just offered herself to me as she disappears into the crowd. "How the hell can you tell that?"

"It's a gift." I lean against the bar and grab the shot Roman holds out to me because I sure as hell could use one.

When we've all got one, we raise a toast to Roman's little sister. "To Alina," we all say before downing our shots. She coughs as her face turns red and we all laugh.

"Okay, time to go," Roman says, but she grabs his arm to stop him.

"I want another."

"You said *a* drink," he reminds her.

"But I coughed. You have to give me a chance to get it right." She grins up at him. "Just one more."

Roman sighs and orders another round. We're still waiting for them when I hear someone call my name. Looking over, I spot Anatoly and Grisha headed our way.

"Fuck," I mutter. "We've been spotted."

Roman hisses out a "goddammit," while Danil and Lev step in front of Alina and Matvey wraps an arm around her, pulling her tight against him like it's the most natural thing in the world. She doesn't know that two of the Safronov's top men are headed our way, and from the look on her face I can tell she doesn't care, not as long as Matvey keeps his tight grip on her.

"Hey," I say when the men are close enough, laughing when Grisha slaps me on the back and then waves a hand to get the bartender's attention. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Same thing as you," Anatoly says with a grin. "Having a drink and finding some pussy."

We all share a laugh, and when they have their drinks in hand, they look over and finally notice Alina. Grisha groans in appreciation and nods his head at her.

"Who the fuck is that?"

I feel Roman tense beside me, and I force a laugh and nudge Grisha's shoulder. "No one, just Matvey's piece of ass for the night." I refuse to look at Alina while I say it, and I hope like hell she understands why I'm doing it. If we even hint that she means something to us, it'll only put a target on her head.

"Fucking nice," Grisha says, still eyeing her. "Give her my number when you're done with her."

I watch Matvey's hand tighten on Alina's waist, and before he can say something that will most likely get at least one of us killed, I wrap an arm around Grisha's shoulder and hand him my shot. "Wait till you see the group of women I just saw a few minutes ago," I say, leading him away from my brothers and Alina. Anatoly follows, not wanting to miss out on getting laid, and when I look back over my shoulder, I have just enough time to see Matvey practically carrying Alina out of the club.

Lev walks over to join us, handing me another much-needed shot and making sure that the two Safronov men quickly forget about the dark-haired woman they just saw. We load them with drinks and make sure there's a crowd of willing women around them. We all have our strengths, and being the life of the party has always been one of mine. By the time Anatoly and Grisha stumble out of that club, they can barely remember their own names, let alone the dark-haired woman that Matvey'd had a death grip on.

"Not bad," Danil says, giving me a grin and another shot, because despite pouring vodka into the two Safronov men all night, I'm completely sober.

Roman comes over to join us. "Think they'll remember her?"

"I doubt it," I say. "They're fucking wasted, and even if they do, they won't know who she is. We can just give them some other dark-haired girl's number. There's no way in hell they'll know the difference."

"I still don't like it," Roman says, shaking his head.

Lev scratches at the stubble on his cheek. "We could take them out."

"It's risky," Danil warns.

"The plan was always to take over the Bratva anyway. By killing two of the top men, we're just saving ourselves the extra work later," Lev reasons.

"That's not a bad point," I say, while Lev grins at me.

I know that look in his eyes. He's hoping to kill someone, and I can't help but share his enthusiasm. I sometimes think our fucked-up childhoods created something dark inside all of us. We all carry around a lot of anger, a lot of unresolved shit that we'll never get closure for, and the only thing that's made any of us feel any better about it is violence. There's no denying that we all feel loads better about our pasts when our hands are covered in blood. The beautiful thing about it is that it's also free and doesn't require me to spend an hour talking about my goddamn feelings. I'd much rather kill a man than have an emotional heart-to-heart. No fucking thanks.

“All right, we might as well do it now then,” Danil says, already reaching for his laptop. His fingers fly across the keyboard doing whatever kind of hacker magic he does with that crazy brilliant brain of his. While he works from the corner table we’re at, I wave away yet another group of very willing women.

Lev laughs. “That looked painful for you.”

“It was, and I don’t know why you’re laughing. As much as it pains me to admit it, they weren’t just coming over here for me.”

He laughs harder. “I’m sure the female population will survive one night without us. It’s Alina’s birthday. She’ll never forgive us if we leave with a couple of strange women. You know she’s going to want to stay up late kicking our asses in some racing game and then order pizza at two in the morning.”

“True, and we get to kill a couple of fucks.”

Lev smiles. “Not a bad night at all.”

“All right, I’ve hacked into the CCTV cameras within a mile radius of here so they’ll just keep looping the last hour.” He stands up and slings his messenger bag over his chest. “There’s an alley we can use about a hundred feet from here.”

I down another quick shot and then follow the others through the packed club. Lev leans in close so I can hear him over the music. “Maybe we should take our time.”

Laughing, I say, “Alina might be getting one hell of a birthday present right now.”

“Exactly.”

Roman turns to look at us. “What the hell are you two laughing at?”

“Nothing,” I say, giving another laugh. “Just excited about the upcoming bloodshed.”

He looks like he doesn’t believe me, but he lets it go. Once we’re outside, we stick to the sidewalk and start looking around for two drunk hitmen. It doesn’t take long to spot Anatoly’s broad shoulders and Grisha’s shaved head. They’re both not even close to walking a straight line, and within seconds we’ve caught up to them.

“Hey, party’s not over yet, guys,” I tell them, throwing an arm around Grisha and leading him down one of the side streets.

“It’s not?” he asks, slurring his words so badly I can barely understand him.

“Fuck no it’s not,” I say. “There’s a couple of women who’d like to meet you.”

He laughs, and I do, too, because the thought of him being able to fuck someone right now is laughable. He’s barely keeping his body upright at this point, let alone his cock. Lev and Danil make sure Anatoly is following along after us, and as soon as we step into the alley and see that it’s clear, Roman pulls his gun and shoots Anatoly while I shove Grisha down and pull my gun out.

“What the fuck?” he manages to slur while his sluggish brain tries to wade through the alcohol to make sense of what’s going on.

“Sorry, man. Nothing personal,” I say before shooting him in the head.

“Well that fucking sucks,” Lev says, giving me an annoyed look. “I didn’t get to kill anyone.”

“Sorry. You can kick him if it’ll make you feel any better.”

“Fucker,” he mutters, but I can tell he’s thinking about it.

After a few seconds, he shakes his head. “It’s no fun when they’re already dead.”

“Come on,” I tell him, putting my gun away and smacking his arm. “I’ll let you beat me in the racing game. That’ll cheer you up.”

“You’re such an asshole,” he says, but I can tell he’s trying not to laugh.

We leave the bodies in the alley, knowing they’ll be found at some point, but without the CCTV footage and no witnesses, it’ll be decided that it was a rival Bratva trying to encroach on Safronov territory, not exactly a rare occurrence.

We spent the rest of the night with Alina. It was a fun night, one of the last we all shared together as a family. After Alina was taken, it was like someone had come in and ripped out our hearts. We hadn’t had much to begin with, but without her the darkness we carried around just kept growing.

It’s nearly destroyed all of us, but we vowed to find her and bring her home, and now we’re closer than ever.

The Lebedev Bratva is going to pay for what they’ve taken from us. We’re going to bring Alina home, and we’re going to kill every motherfucker who dared to touch what belongs to us.

Brothers in blood, in life, and in death.

I’ll bleed for my family and die for them. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep them safe, because family is everything, and no one fucks with ours

and lives.

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Chapter 1

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Katya

The flight from Berlin is another awkward Lebedev family flight from hell. The private jet that my brothers own will never be big enough to accommodate our dysfunctional mess. Osip is already waiting for us at whatever mansion he's decided to buy, so at least that's one brother I haven't had to worry about. My older brother, Konstantin, has more than made up for his absence, though. He's been in a foul mood since we left, and we're all giving him as wide of a berth as we can while also being stuck on the same goddamn plane.

Our parents were murdered by a rival Bratva when I was ten, and my brothers have raised me ever since. They left most of my care to a hired staff, but I learned very quickly that the best thing I could do was remain as invisible as possible. The less Konstantin and Osip see me, the better.

I sink further into the leather chair and watch Oksana stumble to the bathroom. After five years of marriage, Konstantin's wife is still having trouble adapting to her new life. I have no doubt she's snorted enough coke to keep her as high as the plane we're in, and, judging by the scowl on Konstantin's face, he's aware of it and minutes away from losing his temper.

I glance over at Simeon, the man who's been my personal bodyguard since I hit puberty and Konstantin decided I needed to be put in a virginity box. Simeon barely meets my eyes, but even when he does, I can tell he's looking through me, not at me. I know it's a self-preservation thing, but I still hate it. Six months ago, one of Konstantin's enforcers made the mistake of smiling at me. He'd had Osip drag him in front of the entire Bratva and had then beaten him to within an inch of his life as a warning. Needless to

say, it was the last damn smile I ever got. Most people don't even know I exist. My brothers have done one hell of a job hiding me, and the people who do know of my existence treat me like I'm invisible.

Maybe I wouldn't hate it so much if the overprotectiveness came from a place of love, but that's not what this is about. I'm a commodity. I'm something they can use, and I'm worth less if I'm tarnished. I know the world my brothers live in, and I know what they do for a living, and it scares the living hell out of me, because I know that one day it's either going to be my ass getting auctioned off or I'm going to be given in marriage to form an alliance. It won't matter if my future husband is old enough to be my grandpa or if he enjoys raping and murdering women. I'll be handed off without a second thought, and that will be that. It's a depressing thought and one that keeps threatening to overwhelm me.

Simeon watches me out of the corner of his eye as I shift in my seat and wrap the blanket tighter around my body. The truth is he isn't only here to make sure no one touches me. He's also here to make sure I don't run away or take matters into my own hands to try and escape my life. I'm not at the point where I would consider taking my own life, but I also haven't been sold off into a miserable marriage yet either. There's no denying that Oksana's method of escape does look downright appealing on certain days. I'm not so sure the punishment Konstantin would give me when he found out about it would be worth it, though. Looking at my brother's tense jaw and clenched fist, I'm guessing no.

When he gets up and storms to the back of the plane, I pretend I don't know where he's going or what he's about to do. Surviving the Lebedev family means making yourself blind to certain things. The fact that my brother keeps a woman as a pet is most definitely one of those things. She's not the first one he's had, and I doubt she'll be the last.

There was a time when I didn't know about the evil that lives in my brothers, but that all shattered when I was twelve and I found a woman chained to our dining room table. She was naked, scared to death, and the chain around her neck had kept her just out of reach of a plate of food. I could tell she was starving and scared and hurting, so the first thing I did was scoot the plate of food closer and then run and get a blanket for her.

I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I knew my brothers would be furious when they saw what someone had done to this woman, so as soon as I covered her in a blanket, I ran to Konstantin. I told him about the

woman and how I'd helped her but that I needed his help to unchain her. He'd calmly listened to me and then taken my hand so we could walk back to the dining room together. As soon as we walked into the room, the woman took one look at my brother and scrambled as far away as her chain would allow. Her naked, dirty body and the rough chain that held her looked so at odds with our formal dining room, and the way she was acting had warning bells ringing in my ears.

Konstantin had hooked a finger under my chin and tilted my face up to his. Cold blue eyes stared down at me as he explained that the woman belonged to him, and that because I'd been bad and tried to help her, he now was being forced to punish her because of me and because of what I'd done. He made me watch as he beat her, and when I tried to close my eyes, he got out his knife and started cutting her. By the time he was done, she was a bloody mess on our cream carpet, and I was no longer the child I once was. He made me kneel by her broken body, watching as she struggled to breathe and begged for death. She lived for another two hours, and I sat with her for each and every one of those minutes, knowing that she died because of me.

When it was over, Konstantin had cupped my face with his bloody hands, smearing my skin with my guilt. "Don't ever fucking interfere with my business, Katya. She's dead because of you, and if I ever see you trying to help one of my pets again, I'm going to put the knife in your hands."

I'd looked up at him, confused and scared and not recognizing the man in front of me as my oldest brother, the one who may be distant but had never been cruel to me. He'd leaned closer and held up the bloody knife.

"I'll make you kill them," he'd said. "I don't care if I have to hold my hand over yours while it happens, but you will be the one with the knife in your hands. Remember that the next time you want to help."

He'd left me standing there next to the poor dead woman, my face covered in her blood from where he'd touched me, and I'd never been so scared in my life. His warning worked, though. I never tried to help again. The next day I'd walked in for supper and there had been another naked woman chained to the table. The staff my brothers employed to keep our house running walked past like she didn't exist. I stepped closer, noticing the large red stain that Konstantin had obviously told the maids to leave, and then I'd met his eyes. He'd raised a dark brow at me, daring me to help the woman at his feet. I could hear her crying, even though she was trying so damn hard to not draw attention to herself. It killed a part of me to ignore

her completely and go sit down in my usual spot, but I did it to help her. I did it to save her life, and I've been ignoring them ever since.

Sometimes I think the part of me that makes me human died with that woman eight years ago, because I've felt numb ever since. I wake up every morning and I go through the motions, and one day slips into the next and on and on it goes. I'm not sure how much more I can take, but when I think of an endless future of a life that I don't feel like I'm living, a life that I'm merely surviving, I feel like I can't breathe.

Simeon side-eyes me when I grab the bag at my feet and start digging around for the one thing that will stop the panic attack that's threatening to rise up and consume me. When my fingers hit the sketchpad, I let out the breath I've been holding and pull it against my chest while my other hand keeps looking for the small case that holds my colored pencils and charcoal sticks. When I've got it, I open the nearly full sketchpad and flip to a blank page.

Oksana stumbles back to her chair, but I don't even lift my head. I'd rather not see the doped-up look on the face that was once so beautiful but is now gaunt and pale and completely empty. I do what I've learned to do best. I ignore everything and pick up a piece of charcoal, losing myself in the lines on the page. The soft strokes and precise movements slowly blend together to create the bird I'm working on. I don't draw the black swan that's the symbol for the Lebedev Bratva, the one my brothers have tattooed on their forearms. Instead, I draw a magpie, one of my favorite birds. I envy the freedom of a creature that can just take off any damn time it wants. I'd give anything to escape, but my brothers have made sure my wings are permanently clipped. I won't be leaving my cage anytime soon.

By the time the plane begins its descent, I'm almost finished with my drawing, Oksana is passed out, and Konstantin is back in his seat, looking slightly less pissed off than he was. I pack up my stuff and grip the armrests as we hit the ground. The plane vibrates and races down the runway before finally coming to a stop.

Osip is waiting for us with a line of black SUVs. I step off the plane, sandwiched between Konstantin and Simeon. Oksana throws on a pair of dark sunglasses and follows behind Simeon. Konstantin never travels without his top men. The twenty well-trained Bratva members file out from the middle section of the plane, the last one holds the end of a leash. The

dark-haired woman it's attached to walks with her head down before disappearing into the last SUV with several of the men.

"How was the flight?" Osip asks, walking up to our brother while completely ignoring me.

"It was fine." Konstantin climbs into the passenger seat while Osip gets behind the wheel. Oksana and I climb into the back with Simeon. "Is the house all set up?"

"Yeah, of course," Osip says, driving us away from the private airport. "You'll love it. Lots of privacy and I've already employed a staff to do the cooking and cleaning."

"Americans?" Konstantin asks.

Osip laughs. "Fuck no. I found some Russian women who understand what's expected of them."

"Is everything all set for tomorrow's dinner?" Konstantin glances back at us, but I keep looking out the window and pretend I'm not listening.

"Yeah, everything looks good. I'll text them the address tomorrow morning," Osip says.

They don't often discuss business in front of me, but I've caught enough tidbits of conversation over the last few weeks to know that some big deal is about to be made with a local Bratva, and that I'm not invited to it, which is more than fine by me. Konstantin turns around and looks at Oksana.

"Think you can keep your fucking nose clean long enough to sit through a goddamn dinner?"

Oksana's still high as a kite when she smiles as says, "Of course, dear."

"You're fucking useless," he spits at her. "The agreement I have with your father is the only thing keeping you alive right now, and the last I heard is that his health isn't doing all that great. You might want to try not pissing me off."

When I chance a look at Oksana, I don't see fear in her eyes; I see hope. She wants out of this life as much as I do, and it looks like my brother is about to make that happen for her. Before she can say anything to speed up her ending, I give her hand a soft squeeze, pleading with her to not push Konstantin any further. Her hand is limp in mine, but she gives a soft sigh and turns her head away to look out the window while the two men in front of us go back to discussing business.

Osip drives us further out of the city, and the sun is just starting to set when he pulls up in front of a large iron gate. The man standing guard takes

one look at my brothers' faces and quickly gives them a respectful nod and pushes a button so the gate swings open, allowing us entry.

"We have guards all over the perimeter," Osip says, driving down a long driveway that eventually ends in front of a large, brick mansion. The place is beautiful, but that doesn't surprise me. Our family has always been surrounded by beautiful things. One of life's great ironies. I look at my two brothers. I know the monsters they are, and I know the cruelty they're capable of, but looking at them, you'd never guess it. They're handsome, disarmingly so, and many women have made the unfortunate mistake of trying to get to know them better. My brothers aren't the kind of men you want to know better. They're the kind you want to run screaming from. They're sadistic fucks who love to torture women, and I was lucky enough to be born their sister.

The men start unloading the bags while one of them escorts Konstantin's pet in through a side door and the rest of us take the main entrance. I look over my shoulder and see her stumble before the man tugs on her leash even harder, pulling at her neck so she's forced to gain her balance or be dragged over the rocky path. She rights herself and then disappears from view. It'll be the last time I see her until we travel again. She'll be hidden away behind a locked door with guards posted outside it.

Oksana and I follow my brothers inside. The staff is already lined up, ready and waiting to meet their boss. I notice they're all young, pretty women. That's not by chance. Osip picked these women on purpose, and judging by the scared glances they keep giving him, he's already had his way with them. Konstantin starts at the end of the line and slowly walks in front of them. His look is predatory, and when he stops in front of the last woman, he reaches out and runs a finger along her jaw.

"Come to my room tonight," he tells her and then dismisses them with a wave of his hand. Oksana doesn't even bat an eye at her husband making plans to fuck another woman. She learned the truth of things on their wedding night when he raped her and then ignored her for the next three months while he traveled with one of his pets and trafficked women. The one bright spot in their marriage is that she's never gotten pregnant. I know it infuriates Konstantin, but I'm secretly thrilled. I don't think I could survive watching my future nephew being shaped into a misogynistic, abusive asshole or watching a niece have to live the life I'm being forced to live.

Before Konstantin and Osip walk off, Osip looks at me. “I had one of the maids get a room ready for you. Simeon will be right next door.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, slinging my bag over my shoulder, ready to disappear for a while.

“We have an important supper tomorrow night,” Konstantin says, stepping closer. My stomach drops when he reaches out and cups my face. His blue eyes, the same ones that Osip and I share, look back at me, and I know I’m not going to like whatever it is that he’s about to say.

“The Melnikov Bratva runs this city, and we need to form a good relationship with them. We do a lot of business here, and we need things to run smoothly. They’re important customers of ours, but they’ve also been keeping the Alessi mafia on their side of the damn city. The Italians are a distraction we can’t afford right now, and we need to keep the Melnikov brothers happy so our business will continue to run smoothly. They’re ruthless, and they have a lot of fucking power and money.”

I look up at him, waiting for the part that’s going to involve me and dreading it at the same time.

“You’re finally going to be of use to us, little sister,” he says while Osip gives a soft laugh. “We’re uniting our families.”

“What?” I whisper, my brain refusing to take in what I’m hearing.

“One of the brothers owns Pink, a prominent club in the city, and I’m going to propose a marriage between the two of you. There’s another brother that’s single, so I guess if he’d rather marry you, that’s fine too. The choice will be theirs, but I’d prefer the strip club connection.”

Nausea hits me hard as I struggle to take in a breath. My worst fear is finally happening. I’m going to be married off to some psycho who helps traffic women and owns a goddamn strip club. Konstantin tightens his grip on my face. He’s never hit me, but that’s only because he doesn’t have to. He knows I’m terrified of him, and he knows that all he has to do is threaten to hurt someone else and I’ll cave. I feel like I’m twelve years old again, standing before my brother while he slowly butchers a woman.

“Do you have a problem with this plan, Katya?”

“No,” I whisper while my heart beats wildly in my chest. My only hope is that maybe by some miracle my future husband will be less of a monster than my own flesh and blood. I just need to survive it, I remind myself. Marry whoever the hell this Melnikov guy is and bide my time until I can

figure out a way to escape. It's either that or become like Oksana, and I refuse to allow that to happen.

Konstantin roughly pats my cheek. "Good. Now go to your room and stay there. I'll let you know when everything is in place."

My brothers walk off without a backward glance. Knowing I've been dismissed, I turn and follow one of the maids to the room that's been prepared for me while Simeon trails behind us. I thank her as she quickly ducks her head and before I can even ask if she's okay, she runs off to some other part of this massive house. The large room I step into is beautiful, but I barely notice the comfortable-looking bed and windows that overlook a perfectly manicured lawn. I do notice the click of a lock when Simeon leaves, letting me know I've been locked in.

Dropping my bags, I walk over to the window and stare out at the yard that never seems to end. It's just a pretty illusion, though. Beyond the green grass and line of trees in the distance is an iron fence that spans the perimeter and armed guards walking every inch of this place. Nothing is as it seems, and no one can be trusted. I learned a long time ago that sometimes the most vile of men are the ones that are the most beautiful. That's why they're so damn good at it. They disarm you with their charm and good looks, and by the time you realize the man in front of you isn't who you thought he was, it's too damn late. The knife is already pressed to your throat and you don't even realize you're close to bleeding out.

The men in my world kill their wives slowly. They do it by beating them and cheating on them and humiliating them over and over again. Wives are expendable if they don't serve a purpose. Oksana knows this. She knows once her dad dies that Konstantin won't have a use for her. How long until I become expendable to my future husband?

A million questions and fears rush through my head, and I don't want to face a single one of them. Kicking my shoes off, I dig my sketchpad out and get back to work. It's the only thing that will quiet the voices in my head and calm my racing heart. I lose myself in my drawing, not wanting to think about how many more nights it will be before I'm forced to share my bed and my body with a complete stranger.

Chapter 2

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Vitaly

“Sweet mother of god, are you done mother henning this shit?”

Roman looks over his shoulder at me, clearly not amused. “I’m not mother henning anything.”

I laugh and wave my hand around the nursery that we’ve been standing in for the last three hours. “This is the seventh goddamn time you’ve painted that trim. You’re fucking killing me, man.”

He scrubs a hand over his face and looks around the newly painted walls. “I just want it to be perfect.”

Emily chose a robin’s egg blue for the walls, and Roman wanted to surprise her by getting the room painted, but what should’ve been a quick project has turned into an all goddamn day event.

Danil walks by and laughs before stepping in. “Jesus Christ, you’re still working on this?”

“Not you too,” Roman mutters, but then he picks up the paintbrush again and goes to dab at some invisible spot along one of the baseboards.

“He’s fucking lost his mind,” I tell Danil.

Laughing, Danil steps aside so Lev and Matvey can come in. They’d been helping us earlier, but I’m the only one who’s stuck around to see Roman’s transformation from deadly Bratva boss to mother hen. The pictures and video I took have been worth the entire morning I’ve spent in here.

“I’m not sure you’re supposed to do seventeen coats of paint,” Matvey says. “And your wife is getting antsy. She wants to see what it looks like.”

“It looks like her husband’s lost his mind,” I say and then hold up my phone. “I’ll put the photos in the group chat later. I especially like the video

I took of him where he almost cries when he accidentally drips some blue paint onto the window trim. He'd looked so sad. It's fucking hilarious. I want to set it to some really sad music before I pass that gem around, though."

Roman points a finger at me. "Payback, Vitaly. I'm going to get your ass back for this."

That really makes me laugh. "Have at it. It'll be the payback that never happens. Always the uncle, never the dad. That's my new life motto."

"I think I said that once, too," Lev says with a grin that makes it obvious he's thinking about his pregnant wife.

"Well, what can I say? Some of us stick to our convictions."

Lev laughs and smacks me on the back. "You keep telling yourself that."

I'm about to call him a fucker, but Emily's excited squeal cuts me off. She rushes in as fast as her pregnant belly will allow and throws her arms around Roman. She's getting bigger by the day and soon she'll be doing that pregnant waddle. We're all on high alert because Roman, Danil, and Lev have started reading pregnancy books, and now all five of us are terrified of pregnant women stumbling, early labor, and a million other things that can apparently go wrong during a pregnancy.

"I love it," she says, spinning around and making Roman's face pale as he reaches out to stop her fast movements. She laughs and pats his chest. "Babe, I'm not going to fall."

"The books say your balance could get all out of whack, *solnishka*. No sudden movements."

"I knew we shouldn't have let them read those books," Simona says with a laugh, walking in to see the walls we've painted.

Danil wraps her in a hug. "Did you really think I wouldn't do research on this?"

"That's true," she admits. "I'm guessing by the time I go into labor you'll know more than the damn doctor."

"I'm not ready to think about labor." Jolene laughs and wraps an arm around Lev's waist as he pulls her in tighter.

"You and me both, *malinkaya*," he tells her.

My brothers are used to violence, but just the thought of their wives being in pain is enough to make them all look like they're about to be sick.

“You guys are going to be a wreck at the hospital,” I say. “Thank god you at least didn’t get them all pregnant at the same time. I don’t think I’d survive all three of you freaking out at once.”

“We’re not going to freak out,” Roman says.

I look over at the corner and point at the trim. “I think you missed a spot.”

He turns on instinct, brow already furrowed before he hears the rest of us laugh. “You’re such a fucker,” he tells me, but I hear the love in his voice.

Emily looks over at me. “Just wait until later.”

I lift a brow. “What’s later?”

She smiles and says, “You five get to put together a crib.”

I’m already calculating how much vodka we’ll need to survive that project when Roman’s phone buzzes. His entire demeanor changes when he reads it.

“What is it?” Matvey asks in Russian.

Eyes still on his phone, he says, “The supper’s tonight.”

He doesn’t need to elaborate. We all know what he’s talking about. We’ve been waiting for the invitation. Osip had been vague, saying we were invited to dinner in one month and that we’d be sent the address the day of. It’s been exactly thirty days since we last saw him. We’ve all been stressing about this, and that worry is partly to blame for Roman’s obsessive attention to detail about the paint job. He’s worrying about bringing his pregnant wife to the house of one of the most notorious sex-trafficking Bratvas in the world. They all are.

The reason our family works so well is because we all complement one another. I’ve always been the jokester, the one who helps lighten the mood, and although that’s just me by nature, I’m fully aware that without some comedic relief the stress and worry over Alina would’ve eaten us all alive by now, so when I crack a joke about how I’m sure the food won’t be *that* bad, it’s not because I don’t care. It’s because I’ll do anything to spare them the pain of what we’re going through, even if it’s for only a second, and even if that one second involves an eye roll and calling me a fucker.

“What’s going on?” Jolene asks, looking up at Lev.

He leans down and kisses her forehead. “The supper’s tonight.”

“With the Lebedev Bratva?” Emily asks.

Roman nods and then looks back at the blue walls he just painted, and I know he's wishing he could leave his wife and their unborn son in the safety of our penthouse, but there's no getting out of this. We've been waiting almost two years for this moment, and there's no way in hell we can refuse the invitation or leave their wives at home.

"We won't let them out of our sight," Matvey reminds them. "No matter what."

"Text me the address so I can start digging around," Danil says, pulling Simona out of the room with him so he can start doing research. He's desperate to gain back some control, but I'm guessing Konstantin has made sure that he'll only find what he wants him to find and not a drop more. Tonight's dinner is hitting Danil especially hard. Simona's the only one who's ever met Konstantin. After she was kidnapped, she'd been auctioned off, and Konstantin had walked past all the women. He'd taken an interest in Simona, so Danil is more than ready to put a bullet in the man's head.

"How much time do we have?" Jolene asks.

"Supper is at seven, and it looks like it's about forty-five minutes away," Roman tells her.

"It's a damn good thing we planned ahead and bought outfits," she says. "I'm not so sure he'd appreciate me showing up in jeans and a hoodie."

"Fuck 'em," Lev says. "You can wear whatever the hell you want."

She smiles up at him. "Thanks, but I'll wear the black dress I got."

He leans down and whispers who the hell knows what kind of lovey-dovey shit that has her blushing and reaching for his hand as she pulls him from the room. I'm surrounded by horny pregnant women. Matvey and I head for the kitchen to get some lunch while our brothers disappear with their wives.

"What do you think it'll be like tonight?" he asks, grabbing a couple of frozen pizzas because that's the extent of our combined culinary skills.

"I'm guessing a large, pretentious house and lots of armed men. He's going to want to remind us of how powerful they are." I preheat the oven and grab a couple of round baking sheets. "Also a trophy wife, probably blonde with giant tits."

"Are you sure that isn't just wishful thinking on your part?"

I laugh and put the pizzas in the oven. "Is that my type?" I ask, tilting my head and giving the question a good pondering.

“Only since we were teenagers,” Matvey says, leaning against the counter.

“I like to think I’m open to various types of women. I may be partial to blondes, but I’ve had my fair share of brunettes and redheads. I try not to be picky.”

The truth is that every encounter I’ve ever had has been completely superficial. I really don’t give a fuck what color their hair is or what size their tits are. I want a woman who wants to have a good time with no strings attached. My only real turnoff is clinginess. I once bought a woman a few drinks at a club, and after she’d loosened up, she’d laughed and said our kids would have beautiful eyes and then she’d suggested I meet her parents. My dick has never gone so soft so goddamn fast in my life.

“You know, I’ve never even looked at another woman,” he admits with a shrug. “It’s like I don’t even fucking see them.”

Matvey and I have always been close, and after the night I pulled him from the fire, the bond has just grown. My scarred hands gave me a small taste of the hell he went through, and I honestly don’t know how he survived the pain. He couldn’t tolerate even the slightest touch, and he was insecure about his scars. As he got older, it just seemed to get worse. Alina has been a constant in his life. She was like a little sister, and then she became a friend, and then she became the love of his life.

Matvey turns his dark eyes to me. “Is that weird?”

“Yes,” I tell him with a straight face. “So fucking weird.”

He studies me for a second, and then gives me a faint smile. It’s the most he can manage nowadays. “You’re such a jackass.”

“I try.” I grab us each a coke and hand him one. “Some people weren’t made for the single life, and you’re one of them. You and Alina have always been destined for one another.” I point a finger at him. “If you tell the others I was spouting fairytale bullshit, I’ll deny it till the day I die.”

He holds up a scarred palm that mirrors my own and says, “My lips are sealed, brother.”

Confident he won’t say anything, I lean against the counter and take a drink. “Alina’s been in love with you her whole life, and you fell hard as soon as she got older. I’m pretty sure you were already head over heels on her eighteenth birthday. Remember when Grisha looked at her? I thought you were going to kill him right then and there.”

Matvey's face hardens at the memory, but then I can tell his mind immediately wanders to thoughts about what kind of man has her now, and the look on his face guts me.

"We're so close," I remind him, "so fucking close."

"I feel like I can't breathe without her." His gravelly voice is barely more than a whisper. "Before you pulled me out of that damn fire, I knew I was going to die. I couldn't breathe. My lungs just completely seized up and I couldn't get a breath, no matter how fucking hard I tried. That's exactly how I feel when I think about where she might be or what's being done to her."

I rest my hand lightly on his back, just enough to remind him that I'm here and that I'm not going anywhere. "I wasn't about to leave you in that goddamn fire all those years ago, and I'm not about to leave you now."

I mean every word of what I'm saying. If I couldn't have pulled him out of that apartment, then I would've died with him that night. Leaving him to die alone was never an option. Not then and not now. My life was never worth anything, and I would've gladly given it up for him.

"We're in this together to the end, Matvey. We're going to get her back. I promise you I'll never stop looking for her."

He nods, but the anguish is still clearly written on his face. "Tonight should be a lot of fun," he finally says, letting out a heavy sigh.

I give a soft laugh and take the pizza out. "Dinner with a notorious sex-trafficking Bratva that we're planning on taking down, what could possibly go wrong?"

"I'm looking forward to killing them," Matvey says, taking the plate I offer him.

"Me, too, just make sure you don't do it tonight."

"I won't. I'd never put Alina's life in danger like that."

"I know you wouldn't."

I take a bite of pizza and think about what we're about to walk into. God, I can already feel the tension. Roman, Danil, and Lev are going to be on high alert, and Matvey has a hard enough time being around people, but he should be okay as long as some woman doesn't try to crawl into his lap. That leaves me to try and keep everyone sane and alive. It's going to be a long fucking night.

I make a few calls to Pink, the strip club that I've been running, making sure that everything is set up for tonight. This club used to be an absolute

shithole, a place so sleazy that you felt like you needed to put on a full-body condom before walking through the doors, but I've managed to turn it into a classy place that's quickly gaining a reputation for being the best club in the city to get a steak and a dance from a beautiful woman. I'm pretty damn proud of it, and knowing everything is taken care of there will allow me to put all my focus on the Lebedev dinner.

Satisfied that the club will survive the night without me, I spend the next couple of hours wearing myself out in the home gym that we all share. By the time I get in the shower, I'm covered in sweat and my mind is wonderfully blank. Mindlessly punching a bag for an hour will do that to you. It's the closest to meditating that I'll probably ever get, and I enjoy the peace while I have it. I doubt it'll last long.

Choosing an all-black suit, I finish getting ready and then head downstairs. Everyone else is already ready and waiting. There's so much fidgeting going on that I finally shake my head and laugh.

"You guys are making me feel antsy just by being around you. They're going to pick up on this shit."

Lev drags a hand through the hair that's always in need of a cut. "I know, but it's different tonight. Our wives are going to be there."

"Our *pregnant* wives," Roman adds.

"And the place is a fucking fortress," Danil says, putting his laptop on the counter so we can all see. "It's on five acres right outside the city, and the property is secluded thanks to several acres of woods that surround the house. Osip must've bought the house, but it's listed under a fake name."

"So we could be walking into a trap," Lev says, tightening his arm around Jolene.

"That's always a possibility," Matvey says, "but we don't have a choice. Our men know where we'll be tonight. Timofey is leading a team of men, and they'll be stationed just past the property line. Konstantin isn't stupid. He knows attacking us will start a war, and that's the last fucking thing he wants. Plus, there's Dominic. He has no idea the Alessi family is working with us."

"True," I agree, knowing that Dominic will step in if something happens to us, not so much because he cares, but because he wants to find the man who bought and killed his sister, and with us dead that'll make it a lot harder for him to get that information.

"Dominic knows where we'll be, right?" Emily asks.

“Yeah, *solnishka*. He and his father got back from Italy last week, and I texted to let him know what was happening tonight.” Roman looks over at us. “If he doesn’t hear from one of us before midnight, he’s sending men in.”

“Should one of us set a reminder on our phones for that?” I ask and then laugh. “Because that’s something I can see one of us forgetting and then all hell breaks loose.” I smack Lev’s shoulder. “He forgave you for shooting him, but I don’t think he’d forgive us for an *oopsie, sorry we forgot to tell you we made it back safe and to not start a mafia war.*”

“You don’t think he’d forgive that?” Jolene asks, keeping a straight face.

I pretend to think and then smile. “I might be able to sweet talk our asses out of that mess.”

She laughs and I eye the black dress she’s wearing. It’s the first time since their wedding that I’ve seen her in anything other than jeans and yoga pants and hoodies. I give an appreciative whistle, ignoring Lev’s murderous look as I give her a playful wink. “You clean up nice, little sis.”

Before Lev can punch me, I step out of range and smile at Emily and Simona. “You two are looking beautiful as well.” I reach out and pat Emily’s pregnant belly. “You get rounder by the day.”

“Jesus Christ,” Danil groans.

“What?” I look up at my brothers and then back at Emily, who’s trying to decide if she’s angry or not. “You’re pregnant and your son is growing by the minute. Isn’t getting rounder the goal of pregnancy?”

Roman wraps his arms around her from behind, resting his hands on her baby bump and looking anything but disappointed at how big it’s getting.

I wave a hand at his smiling face. “See? He fucking loves it.”

“I do,” Roman says, and judging by the way Emily’s face heats up, I’m guessing she’s feeling exactly how much he loves it up against her ass right now.

I point my finger at them. “No disappearing tonight so you can go have horny pregnancy sex.” I turn and wave my hand at the other two couples. “That goes for you guys, too.”

“Okay, dad,” Lev says.

I let out a heavy sigh, realizing what I’ve just done. I’ve become the old guy, the single friend who grumbles about everyone else getting laid. I

shake my head to rid the horrifying thought from my mind. “God, if I’m not careful, I’m going to be making stupid no-blowjob rules like you did.”

Lev laughs. “At least you vetoed it.”

“All right,” Matvey cuts in. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. We stay together. No one leaves for any reason.”

“What if I have to go to the bathroom?” Emily asks, because the longer she’s pregnant, the smaller her bladder gets.

“Then let me know, and I’ll go with you,” Roman says while he helps her into her coat and kisses her forehead.

“What if I have to pee?” I ask.

Roman rolls his eyes at me while Matvey says, “Then let me know, and I’ll go with you.”

I laugh while he cracks a very small smile. “Thanks, brother.”

We manage to squeeze into the elevator together and then smoosh into the SUV. We could drive separately, but where’s the fun in that? I sit in the middle in between Matvey and Jolene. Lev’s driving while Danil sits in the passenger seat, looking at his computer and texting Timofey last-minute information. Emily and Roman and Simona sit in the seat behind us.

“Just wait until we have car seats and diaper bags,” I tell them. “It’ll take us hours to get anywhere.” I look at Danil. “Can you even fit a car seat in your Aston Martin? You might want to look into getting a nice, safe minivan. That’s the responsible choice.”

The look Danil shoots me has Lev laughing from the driver’s seat. “I’m talking to you, too, Lev. You’ll have to trade in your motorcycle. But look on the bright side, a nice line of minivans will look so pretty parked outside the elevator doors.” I let out another laugh and nudge Jolene. “Very kick ass.”

She laughs, but she also says, “No way in hell are we getting rid of the motorcycle.”

Lev winks at her in the rearview mirror. “Never going to happen, *malinkaya*, and we can get something safe that’s not a minivan.”

“It was just a suggestion,” I say with a shrug.

“You’re terrible,” Jolene whispers.

“A man with that many piercings and tattoos and muscles needs to be kept humble, and I think a minivan would do the trick.”

Jolene laughs and shakes her head. “Can you imagine him showing up for his next fight driving one of those?”

When I start laughing at the image, Lev darts a quick look at us. “What are you two laughing at?”

“Nothing,” I say while Jolene tries to stop laughing.

“She’ll tell me later,” Lev warns.

“Yeah, but I’ll be safely locked in my bedroom by then.”

He shakes his head at me, and by the time he pulls up to the gated driveway, all the tension I’ve managed to cut comes back in full force as the reality of where we’re at and who we’re about to meet comes crashing down on us. The two men at the gate are well-trained. I can see it in the way they hold themselves, in the eyes that take in every detail of our vehicle and the man driving it, and if that wasn’t clue enough, the guns they have strapped to their bodies would be enough to let anyone know they’re not fucking around.

We’re armed, too, and I’m guessing Konstantin and Osip will be as well. There’s going to be a lot of guns at the dinner table tonight. One of the men steps closer and looks past Lev, and when his eyes land on Jolene, I lean forward and angle my body in front of hers, meeting the guard’s eyes.

“We have an invitation, and if we’re late, then the food will probably get cold, and I really fucking hate that.” The guy narrows his eyes at me, and I can tell he really wants to reach in and punch me. I smile and add, “Open the fucking gate,” in Russian.

Lev shrugs. “You heard him. He hates cold food.”

The man steps back and speaks into the earpiece he’s wearing, letting whoever’s listening know that we’ve arrived. When he nods at the other man, the gate is opened and we drive by and down the long-ass driveway. The gate closes behind us, and I know my brothers are all thinking the same thing I’m thinking. If shit goes bad, it’s not going to be easy to get our asses out of here.

“Timofey and his team in place?” I ask Danil.

“Yeah, they’re surrounding the property.” He checks his phone again and adds, “He said they’ve counted thirty guards on the property so far.”

“I really don’t like this,” Roman mutters.

When Lev pulls in front of the enormous mansion, I say, “Looks like I was spot-on as usual. Pretentious and a shit-ton of armed men. I really hope the food’s good at least.”

“Let’s fucking get this over with,” Lev groans, opening his door and quickly pulling Jolene against him as soon as she steps out. Danil and

Roman do the same, and soon we're all walking up the stairs and past the columns that of course this mansion has. Lev rings the doorbell and within seconds a young woman answers it. She's wearing a simple black dress and matching heels, and when she greets us in Russian and quickly steps aside so we can enter, it's obvious she works for the Lebedev family in some way. She keeps her eyes down and offers to take the coats the women are wearing.

"Please follow me," she says, leading us further into the house.

I look around, not bothering to hide my curiosity. Aside from some ugly paintings that probably cost a fortune and a bunch of furniture that looks so uncomfortable I'm guessing it would put your ass to sleep within minutes, there isn't much to see. Everything here is for show, and none of it is going to actually tell us anything about the men we're here to meet. Stopping in front of a formal sitting area, the woman gestures for us to step in as she says, "Mr. Lebedev, your guests have arrived."

We walk into the room and come face to face with the man we've been researching for months. Konstantin grins and rises from the chair he was sitting in. A tall, blonde woman does the same, standing beside him with a pasted-on smile. I chance a quick glance at Matvey because she is blonde, and she does have huge tits, so I was right about the trophy wife. She'd be pretty if she didn't look so strung out. Her hazel eyes are glazed and empty, and the smile she gives is obviously just for show. I doubt this woman actually feels anything. I'm guessing she's done everything within her power to make herself as numb as possible. Being married to Konstantin has clearly taken its toll.

Konstantin holds out his hand to Danil, who's standing closest to him. "Welcome and thank you all for coming." He's speaking English, letting us know that he's done enough research to know that Simona, Emily, and Jolene don't speak Russian. "You must be Danil, right?"

"Yeah," Danil says, shaking Konstantin's hand and then tensing his jaw when Konstantin takes Simona's hand and leans in to kiss her cheek. "A handshake is good," Danil says, cupping his wife's face and kissing her forehead, refusing to let another man put his lips on her.

Pulling back, Konstantin runs his eyes over her and gives a soft smirk. "I remember you." Danil's had all he can take, and when he tightens his arm around his wife and angles her so she's no longer in his view, Konstantin gives a soft laugh and says, "I hear congratulations are in order."

He smiles and then continues down the line like nothing is amiss, shaking hands and offering congratulations to the three pregnant women. Emily is really the only one that's showing. Simona's starting to, but you could easily overlook it, and Jolene is only a few weeks along, so there's no way in hell he could know it unless he's really dug around and found their medical records.

"I see you've done your research," Lev says, not bothering to beat around the bush.

Konstantin smiles and shrugs before shaking my hand. "I'd be stupid not to."

"And who is this?" I ask, nodding at the blonde woman.

Konstantin's smile falters before he puts it back in place and wraps his arm around her shoulders. "This is my wife, Oksana. I'm afraid her English isn't all that great."

"Nice to meet you," I tell her in Russian, but I might as well be talking to the damn wall for all the reaction I get.

"And you must be Matvey," Konstantin says, ignoring his wife and shaking Matvey's hand when he nods and offers it.

Osip comes walking in with a smile. "Perfect, you all made it. Dinner's ready and then we can talk business."

We follow them into an ornate dining room. French doors look out onto a veranda that's lit up with soft solar lights and beyond that I can just make out the edge of an in-ground pool. The room we're in has a plush rug over dark hardwood floors and an enormous fucking chandelier hanging above the center of the table. Expensive china is already set out for us, and we each take a seat right before several women come walking in with food and bottles of wine. Their uniforms are tasteful but form fitting, and I can't help but notice that they're all young and attractive. One of them holds a carafe of sparkling water for the pregnant women, but I gladly nod to the woman holding a bottle of wine.

I can already tell this is going to be a long fucking night. We work on our salads while we make small talk. Konstantin asks questions, but he's careful to keep the conversation away from business. He smiles and laughs and makes a point of involving everyone at the table. He's a real charmer, this one, and I'm sure he's fooled many women into thinking he's harmless. His wife picks at her food, probably wishing for her next hit of whatever the

fuck she's on, while Konstantin ignores her and we slowly make our way through each course of this elaborate meal.

At one point I look up to see Jolene giving her husband a *what the fuck* look, before he gives her a wink while discreetly handing her the correct fork. When she looks back up, I roll my eyes at her, knowing that, like me, she'd much rather have a pizza or a freshly grilled steak than whatever kind of dainty-ass food is on our plates now. She bites back a laugh and stabs at a carrot that's been carved to look like a rose.

When the dessert is finally brought out, Konstantin looks at us and says, "I don't like to talk business in front of women, but there is something I would like to propose."

We wait for him to continue, and what he says next turns my entire fucking world upside down.

"I've been doing business in this city for several years now, and I don't want it disrupted. You five have now taken over the part of the city that I need, and I have no desire to start a war with you. It would be a waste of time, money, and manpower, and meanwhile I'd be losing business. It takes a lot of time to set things up in a brand-new city, and I'd rather avoid that." He stops to take a drink of wine. "I have a good thing going here. Why ruin that when we could work together? That's why I'm proposing we unite our families the old-fashioned way."

I'm too stunned to speak, so when he turns his head to where Matvey and I are sitting, he's met with silence. It's taking enough to keep my face blank. I can't form words and manage a disinterested stare.

"I have a sister," he says, and my chest starts to feel tight. "And you two are the only unmarried brothers, so I'm offering her to one of you."

"You have a sister?" Danil asks, and I know he's buying me time to get my shit together.

Konstantin turns to him and nods. "We do, yes. We've worked very hard to keep her hidden. She's twenty and very beautiful." Turning back to me and Matvey, he says, "This would unite our families and form a trust between us. Without this, I'm afraid I won't feel comfortable working closely with your Bratva. I want to know I can trust you. If we're going to work together, then you'll need to know details about what we do and how we do it. These aren't details I freely give."

"You said you wanted to be a part of this," Osip reminds us. "This is our offer to make that happen."

I'm still trying to get my lungs to unclench so I can get some goddamn air. I feel like I'm suffocating and the need to rip the top buttons of my shirt off is overwhelming. If I don't step forward and do this, then we're going to lose our one shot at finding Alina. If I don't say yes, then Matvey will have to, and I can't fucking do that to him. I can already see the way he's gripping his thigh under the table. Whatever I'm feeling right now, he's feeling double.

"So who wants to accept my offer?" Konstantin studies our faces, watching every detail, so I force air into my too-tight lungs and scrub a hand over my jaw.

"Looks like I'm getting married," I say, nearly gagging on the damn words.

Konstantin smiles at Osip and then looks back at me as he raises his wine glass. "To uniting the families."

I drink to my upcoming marriage, but it feels more like I'm drinking to my death. What the fuck just happened?

I force out a laugh. "So do I get to meet my fiancée?"

"I'm afraid not," he says. "It's our tradition that you don't see the bride until the wedding ceremony. She's lived a very sheltered life, and I can promise you that she's innocent in every way possible. We can have the ceremony tomorrow evening."

I nearly choke on the wine I just swallowed. "Tomorrow evening?"

"We'll take care of everything, of course," he says like my big concern here is whether or not the flower arrangements will be ready in time. "I see no reason to wait. We have," he pauses for a second while a smile plays at his lips, "a shipment coming in, and we can't afford a delay."

We all know he's talking about an auction of sex-trafficked women, but no one says it out loud. I chance a quick look at Simona, wondering how she's taking the news. She knows firsthand what those women are going through, but she's keeping her face as guarded as I am. Danil's hand is on back of her neck, though, and I'm guessing his other one is on her thigh under the table, comforting her as much as he can right now.

"Tomorrow it is then," I say, and then I down the rest of my wine and motion for one of the women to refill my damn glass.

The rest of the evening is a blur. My brothers take over, holding up the conversation so I don't have to, and by the time we say our goodbyes, I'm

well on my way to drunk but also feeling like I'm going to vomit all over his nicely pruned rose bushes.

The drive back is quiet. I don't even have it in me to muster up a joke. I'm too shell-shocked to do much of anything. As soon as we're back in the penthouse, I grab a bottle of vodka and fill a large glass.

"I'm sorry," Matvey says, coming to stand by me. "I'm really fucking sorry."

I toss back the remaining vodka and fill it right back up again. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about," I tell him.

"Maybe it won't be as bad as you're thinking," Roman says, trying like hell to paint my upcoming forced nuptials in a positive light.

I bark out a laugh. "He wouldn't even let me see her. That can't be a good sign."

"We'll get it annulled," Danil quickly says.

"Yeah, just don't fuck her," Lev says.

"That won't be a problem. This is just for show, and once we have what we need, we're killing all of them, and we will never fucking speak of this again."

Lev smacks my back, and I can see the amused glint in his eyes before he says, "Thanks for taking one for the team, brother."

"Oh, you fucking bastard," I say, making him laugh, and then once he starts, the rest of them join in. "This is so not fucking funny." They all ignore me, and soon Emily's wiping away a tear and clutching at her pregnant belly while she tries to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry," she finally manages to say. "It's just the stress."

I lift a brow at her.

"It is," she says. "But it's also kind of funny because you swore you'd never get married, and now in less than twenty-four hours you're going to have a wife."

"Jesus Christ," I groan when the reality of her words hits me.

Simona gives my arm a squeeze. "It'll be okay. She can hang out with us, and you can keep yourself busy with work. It'll be annulled before you know it."

Lev raises a glass to me. "Just don't fuck her."

"I don't know why you feel like you need to keep reminding me of that."

He laughs and tosses back his drink. I'm not even close to being done, so I grab the bottle again and refill my glass. My last night being single for god knows how long, and I'm sure as fuck not going to spend it sober. I'll be saying *I do* with one hell of a hangover, but somehow it feels appropriate that I'll be miserable both physically and mentally. I can feel the clock ticking down my seconds of freedom as I finish my drink and pour another. Matvey grabs a glass and fills his own, and I know he'll stay with me the whole night so I don't have to suffer alone. Together to the end, even if the end isn't quite what I envisioned it being.

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Chapter 3

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Katya

The next morning Konstantin barges into my bedroom and tosses a large garment bag on my still half-asleep body.

“What are you doing?” My voice is thick with sleep, and my mind is way too sluggish to make sense of what’s going on.

“Your wedding is this evening. Get your ass out of bed and see if this fits.”

I bite my lip to keep from asking a million questions while I resist the very strong urge to kick the bag onto the floor. The weight of it feels oppressive, and the room is suddenly a whole lot hotter.

“It’s tonight?” I ask, still unable or unwilling to process the information. “Who am I marrying? You said there were two single brothers.”

“Yes, it’s tonight at six.” I can tell by his tone that he’s annoyed to have to repeat himself. “You’re marrying Vitaly, the owner of Pink.”

I try to swallow, but my mouth is too fucking dry. My heart races and nausea threatens to take over. I’d hoped that maybe I’d have another week or two or that maybe by some miracle my brothers would change their minds. I never thought in a million years I’d wake up to find out I have less than eight hours until my goddamn wedding.

“Oksana will be in to help you later. Get your ass out of bed, Katya, and try on the goddamn dress.”

Knowing he’s about to lose his patience, I jump out of bed and grab the bag that feels like a fucking albatross around my neck. Scurrying into the bathroom, I close the door on my brother’s angry face and hang the garment bag on a hook. Unzipping it, I see the lacy, white dress that’s nestled inside.

I'm not surprised that it's gorgeous and a designer label. I expected nothing less from a brother who only wears bespoke suits.

"I have other things I need to do today," he reminds me through the door.

I quickly strip and then slide into the buttery soft dress. The weather's chilly, so the dress is long sleeved and the neckline is high, but it's stunning and feminine and under normal circumstances I'd be ecstatic to wear it, but not like this, not when I'm being forced to. Zipping the dress up, I look in the mirror, barely recognizing my pale face. I look exactly like a woman who's just rolled out of bed after a shitty night of sleep and then pulled on a gorgeous wedding gown. I look fucking unhinged is what I look like, and I almost let out a laugh because my grip on sanity is becoming very fucking slippery.

"Well?" Konstantin yells.

I open the door and let him see. His cold, blue eyes run over me, not revealing anything that he's thinking. He finally nods and says, "You look like shit, but at least it fits. I'll have someone bring breakfast up and then I have a stylist coming over to help make sure you look presentable."

He steps closer and hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my face up to his. Konstantin is always intimidating, but having him this close makes me feel very breakable.

"Don't embarrass our family, Katya. I expect you to obey your husband and do whatever it takes to make him happy. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I whisper, terrified that the man I'm about to marry might be as much of a monster as the two I've been living with my whole life.

He keeps a tight grip on my face, studying me for several seconds until he's satisfied I'm telling the truth and that I know my place in this family. Without a word, he lets me go and walks out of my room. I've just managed to change out of my dress when there's a soft knock at my door. I open it, seeing a woman about my age carrying a big tray of food, and behind her Simeon is leaning against the wall, guarding my door so I don't try and make any last-minute escape plans.

I tighten the belt of my robe and step aside so she can bring the tray in. I recognize her from yesterday. She's the woman Konstantin told to visit him last night, and when she sets the tray on my bed, I get a clear view of the ring of bruises around her neck.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, and she flinches as soon as she hears me and takes a quick step back.

"I'm fine." Her voice is so low I have to strain to hear her, and her eyes keep darting to the hall, terrified someone's going to overhear us.

"I'm sorry." The words feel so useless, and I hate myself a little bit more for not being able to do anything to help her. My brother is the one who hurt her, and my apology isn't going to do shit to improve her situation. I'm helpless to change it, and she knows it. "I'm sorry," I say again, because it's all I can do.

Her brown eyes meet mine for the briefest of moments, and the pain and terror in hers breaks my damn heart. It's my flesh and blood that did this to her, and I can't do a goddamn thing to stop it or change it. I'm just as helpless as she is against them. Before she runs out of my room, I squeeze her hand and hope that the wedding might at least give her a night away from him.

After she leaves, I sit down and eye the food I know I won't be able to stomach. I settle on a plain piece of toast and a few sips of coffee. When it's clear that's all I'm going to be able to manage, I head for the bathroom for a long shower. I hide under the steaming water until I hear Simeon yelling at me to get out. The one positive spot to all this is that I won't have to deal with him anymore. I'm sure my new husband will have his own hound to guard me, but at least it'll be someone new, maybe this one will even acknowledge my existence from time to time.

The next several hours are spent with a team of women who are evidently being paid to not talk to me. They don't ask questions. They don't even make small talk. It's all business for them, and by the time they're done, my hair is freshly cut and in a complicated braid with tiny crystals woven in, my makeup is impeccable, my nails and toes are painted a delicate pink, and every conceivable place has been waxed.

They're just zipping me into my dress when Oksana walks in holding a large bouquet of pink roses and white calla lilies and a long veil. Her eyes are clear today, and she even gives me a small smile as the other women wish me a quick congratulations and then get the hell out.

"You look beautiful," she says, handing me my bouquet before reaching up and slipping the delicate combs of the veil into my hair. My brothers got the same black hair as our dad, but I took after our mom and got her honey blonde hair with soft curls. I look in the full-length mirror and try to not feel

like I'm headed towards my death. This is supposed to be one of the happiest days of my life, and instead I feel like I'm going to be sick all over this beautiful, white dress.

"I don't think I can do this," I admit. My shaky voice is barely more than a whisper.

Oksana grips my shoulders and turns me toward her. "You will do this, Katya, because you don't have a choice, and you'll survive it for the same reason."

"How?" I ask, begging her for some hidden wisdom, anything that will help me to not have a panic attack in front of everyone, because Konstantin will fucking kill me if I embarrass him.

"We all find a way to survive our own personal hells, and you know the way I've chosen to cope with mine." Her hands fluff out the veil as she gives me a sad smile. "You're stronger than me, though, and I know you won't make the same bad decisions I've made."

She brushes a stray hair back behind my ear, and I want to cry at the sisterly show of affection. When Konstantin had first married Oksana, I'd been excited about getting a sister-in-law, but I should've known Konstantin would never allow us to be close. His constant abuse slowly broke her down until she was a ghost of who she'd once been. The drugs took care of the rest.

"I hope your new husband isn't like your brother, but if he is, do whatever you have to do to survive it, and if you get the chance to run, take it, Katya. Run and get as far away from these bastards as you can."

I squeeze her hand and nod. "I'm sorry for what he's done to you." I feel like I've spent my life apologizing for my brothers. They've hurt so many women, and there's nothing I can do to change it.

"It's not your fault. You're as much of a victim as the rest of us. You're just a different kind of victim." Forcing a smile onto her face, she pulls the thick veil over my head, hiding me from view. "Look on the bright side, you're getting out of this damn house."

I squeeze her hand and let out a shaky breath. She's right. I'm getting out of here and away from my brothers. Maybe my new hell will be better than this one.

"Have you seen the man I'm marrying?"

"No. I haven't seen any of the guests. Konstantin is waiting for you at the bottom of the stairs, though, so we'd better get you down there."

I pull her in for a quick hug. “Thanks, Oksana.” There are so many things I want to say to her, and I hope she can feel all of it in my embrace. She’s the only sister I’ve ever had, and I hate that I have to leave her here.

She hugs me back and then steps away so we can leave the room together. Simeon isn’t at his usual post outside my door, and I wonder if he’s already been called off duty. He’s probably thrilled to no longer be stuck babysitting my ass. We take the stairs slowly because I’m in a pair of dangerously high heels, and although death would be a release from this life, it’s not one I want just yet.

My veil is ridiculously thick, obscuring my vision and annoying the hell out of me. Konstantin wants me hidden from view, just like he’s always done, but this is also a power play. He’s forcing a man to marry me without having any idea of what I look like. This Vitaly guy is evidently desperate to go into business with my brothers. Awesome. My future husband is a strip-club-owning, enthusiastic sex trafficker. Just my fucking luck.

Konstantin stands at the bottom of the stairs in a black tux without a single hair out of place. He holds his arm out to me, and I take it while Osip steps forward. He’s in a similar dark tux, looking so much like our older brother.

“Come on, Oksana, let’s go take our seats.” He holds his arm out for her and then they walk off down the hall and towards the open set of French doors. I can see bouquets of flowers and fairy lights on the veranda and a glimpse of packed chairs. All I can see are broad shoulders and dark suits. Our only guests are going to be Bratva members. They’re witnessing the joining of two Bratva families. This is so much more than just me becoming Vitaly’s wife.

“You got a lot done in less than a day,” I tell him, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

“Money and the right motivation can get most anything done,” he says, and I’m guessing a lot of threats were made to make this special occasion happen. Before he leads me out, he rests his hand on top of mine, but there’s nothing comforting about it. “Even though you’re becoming a Melnikov today, your loyalty will always be to me. Do you understand that? Our family comes first. Always.”

“I understand,” I whisper, feeling the heat of his skin against mine like the warning it is.

“I’d hate to have to hurt someone else to remind you of your duty to this family,” he warns. “Do you want more blood on your tainted hands, Katya?”

“No, please don’t hurt anyone,” I quickly say, thinking about Oksana and his dark-haired pet and the young maid with the bruised neck. “I’m loyal to you, Konstantin.”

He gives my hand a squeeze that’s not at all comforting or reassuring. “Good. Just make sure you don’t forget it, or I will remind you in a very bloody way.”

“I won’t forget.”

By the time we start walking, I’m using all my willpower to not pass out or get sick. I can barely breathe as we walk out onto the veranda and the music starts up. Everything’s a blur thanks to my anxiety and the too-thick veil. We walk down the aisle that’s been formed between the two large groups of chairs, all of them filled with Bratva members. Near the front, I spot Osip on one side, and when I look to the other, I catch a quick glimpse of three couples before Konstantin stops in front of the officiant.

I avoid looking at the man in front of me, the stranger who I’m about to marry, and instead turn to Konstantin when he leans in to kiss my veiled cheek. From the outside, it looks downright sweet, but no one else hears him when he whispers, “Don’t fuck this up,” in my ear before stepping back and guiding me to stand near Oksana and in front of the man he’s giving me to.

Daring to look up, I see a fuzzy glimpse of a man in a dark tux and another man standing behind him. The veil makes it hard to see details, but I see enough to know he’s not old. It looks like I won’t be marrying someone old enough to be my grandpa after all. Small mercies, I guess.

The officiant starts, and the next several minutes are nothing but a mix of my heart beating so fast I feel it in every part of my body and my lungs screaming for air, because no matter how hard I try to calm down, I still feel like I’m suffocating.

Thankfully, the officiant has obviously been told to make this wedding ceremony the short and sweet kind. There’s no exchanging of vows where we promise to love and cherish one another. It’s a simple declaration of *with this ring I thee wed*, and before I know it, rough hands are holding mine and slipping a ring on my finger while I say, “I do.”

Oksana hands me a thicker wedding band that someone must've picked out earlier, and when I hold his hand in mine, I'm surprised by how rough the palm is. It doesn't feel like callouses. It feels like scars, and I can't help but wonder what they're from. I slip the ring on his finger, hearing his voice for the first time when he says, "I do." It's deep, and since the ceremony is in English, I can hear the Russian accent.

He pulls his hand away as soon as the ring is on his finger, like he can't tolerate touching me for one second longer, and when the man next to us says, "You may now kiss your bride," I've never been so scared in my entire life. My new husband steps closer and grips the bottom of my veil, slowly raising it over my head, and when I see his face clearly for the first time, I'm stunned. He's breathtaking—almond-shaped, whiskey-colored eyes, dark hair with a freshly shaved face that's showing off one hell of a chiseled jaw, and a full set of lips that are currently not even hinting at a smile. It seems the monster I've married is a beautiful one. That at least I'm familiar with.

His eyes meet mine right before he leans in, and when my body instinctively stiffens, his eyes narrow as he tilts his head the tiniest bit so his lips land right at the corner of my mouth instead of on it. Stepping back, he quickly looks away from me and back at the man standing behind him. The man's dark eyes meet mine, and he gives me a faint hint of a smile before Konstantin is laughing and shaking Vitaly's hand as he uses his other hand to smack him on the back.

"Welcome to the family," Konstantin tells him.

Vitaly smiles and turns his full attention to my brother. I might as well not even be here. This is obviously a marriage between these two. Oksana gives me a quick hug, whispering a "Good luck" before she steps away, waiting for Konstantin to tell her what to do. Sometimes he likes her by his side, and other times he doesn't want to even see her. When he reaches out a hand for her, she gives a soft sigh that only I can hear before taking his hand and pasting a smile on her face.

I stand slightly behind them in my wedding dress, feeling like an idiot as the weight of my ring hangs heavy on my finger. Glancing down, I look at it for the first time. It's actually really pretty, and I'm surprised by that. I don't know who picked it out, but the delicate platinum band is covered in a line of pink and white diamonds. It's feminine and beautiful and exactly what I would've picked out for myself.

I'm still looking at it when I hear a woman's voice say my name. Looking up, I see three women standing in front of me. One is obviously pregnant, the other looks like she's not too far behind her, and the third isn't showing yet if she is expecting. They're smiling at me, and it's the first genuine smile I've seen all day.

"Hi, I'm Emily," the obviously pregnant one says, stepping closer and wrapping me in a big hug. "It's so nice to meet you."

"I'm Simona," the other woman says, giving me the next hug, and the last woman pulls me in and says, "I'm Jolene. Vitaly's our brother-in-law."

"Oh," I manage to say, looking back at the men who must be my husband's brothers. They don't look like they're related, but they're all handsome and wearing their tuxes like there's nothing but pure muscle underneath. The one with a lip and eyebrow piercing looks up and winks at Jolene, and I'm so stunned by the affectionate look he's giving her that all I can do is stare. When I glance over at Jolene, she's giving him a big smile, and there's not even a hint of fear in her eyes. They can't possibly be ignorant of what their husbands do. Hell, I can see the goddamn viper ouroboros tattoo on two of their wrists. Is it possible that they're okay with what their husbands do?

Feeling sicker by the second, I make up an excuse about needing to use the bathroom and then speed walk my ass inside, avoiding the crowd of Bratva men and the staff that's busy setting up the meal that I'm going to be expected to sit through. I was really hoping we'd just say our vows and be done, but my brother apparently wants to make this look like it wasn't just agreed on yesterday.

I escape into the bathroom near the stairs and lock the door behind me. Bracing my hands against the counter, I face my reflection and force myself to take long, slow breaths. I look like a woman who's about to lose her shit. My eyes are too wide and a bit frantic, my face dangerously pale, and I'm shaking so badly I can see the sides of my veil vibrate. I can't do this. I can't fake this, and Konstantin will murder me if I embarrass him. Tears threaten to fall, but I fight it with everything I have.

My heart hammers in my chest when I hear a soft knock at the door. "Just a sec," I say, hoping whoever it is didn't hear how shaky my words sound. I take in another deep breath and then straighten my shoulders and force myself to unlock the door. The last person I expect to see is my brand-new husband staring down at me. Even with my tall heels, I still have to

look up to see him. His amber eyes study me. They aren't cold like my brother's, but I wouldn't go so far as to say they're warm either. Hesitant is probably the best description. His jaw tightens when I can't stop my eyes from watering again, but I manage to hold back the tears. I can cry myself to sleep later after he's done god knows what to my body.

My breath catches in my throat when I hear Konstantin's voice. He's yelling at someone for not being fast enough with the tray of appetizers. Vitaly watches me, and I swear he notices every damn detail. I'm used to my brother's invasive gaze, but Vitaly makes me feel naked before him, like he sees every damn thing I'm trying to hide. Without a word, he puts a hand on my waist and very gently pushes me back into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

"What are you doing?" I ask, looking around and hoping like hell he's not expecting an after-wedding quickie in the goddamn bathroom. I'm not holding onto some fairytale deflowering fantasy, but I sure as shit don't want to lose my virginity in the bathroom with my brothers right outside the door and a houseful of guests.

"You look like you could use a breather," he says, following my lead and speaking English.

When he realizes his hand is still gripping my hip, he quickly pulls it back and runs it through his dark hair with a sigh.

"I know this is awkward," he says, lifting a brow when I huff out a breath of air because that's one hell of an understatement. "But I need you to know that I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're not the first man to say that and have it turn out to be a lie," I say before I can think better of it.

"I'm not lying, and when I give my word, I mean it, Katya."

Hearing him say my name feels both intimate and foreign. This whole moment is so surreal. This man standing right in front of me is my husband, and I've never even held his damn hand. I don't know anything about him except that he's gorgeous and deadly and quite possibly as sadistic as my brothers.

"You are safe with me," he repeats.

If he's expecting me to cry in relief, he's going to be waiting a while. I've heard my brothers promise shit like this more times than I can count. Words are nothing more than words. They don't mean shit. They're just another way to manipulate people into doing what you want. When I don't

say anything, he sighs and is just about to say something when we hear Konstantin yell my name. I swear I see a flash of anger in those whiskey-colored eyes before he hides it and steps away from me so he can open the door.

“She’s in here,” he tells my brother. “I was just helping her fix her veil.”

Konstantin laughs like he thinks that’s code for *I just fucked your sister in the bathroom* and says, “Well, as soon as you get her presentable, supper is ready.”

“We’ll be right there,” Vitaly tells him, shutting the door again.

He waits for me to take another couple of breaths as I get myself under control so I can go back out there and face everyone as we sit through a meal. When I’m as ready as I’ll ever be, I give him a nod before he opens the door. He surprises me by offering me his arm. I take it, keeping my touch light on his as we walk down the hall and back through the open French doors. The guests are all seated at the tables that have been placed on the lawn under a giant, white tent, and there are so many faces that I don’t recognize interspersed with my brother’s men. It looks like the assigned seating had a purpose behind it. Forced socialization between the Bratva families. I’m sure they’ll all be besties by the time dessert is brought out.

Vitaly leads me to the table that’s front and center and reserved for the wedding party. The three women I met earlier are sitting next to their husbands, along with the man who’d been standing behind Vitaly during the ceremony. My two brothers are also already sitting with Oksana between them. Vitaly pulls a seat out for me and once I’m seated, he takes the chair on my right.

“Katya, I’d like you to meet my brothers,” he says, and then points at the man sitting next to Emily. He goes down the line, introducing each brother and reintroducing their wives. They smile at me, and I do my best to return it. The last man, Matvey, is by himself, and his smile isn’t nearly as big as the others. His eyes are so dark they look black, but there isn’t anything cruel in his look. He seems sad more than anything else, and I have no idea what to make of the Melnikov brothers. When Konstantin taps a fork against his champagne flute, everyone’s attention is pulled to him. My oldest brother stands and gives the same boyish, disarming smile he’s always given when he wants to appear human and put people at ease.

“I just want to make a quick toast to my beautiful sister and the man we’re thrilled to welcome into our family. Vitaly, take good care of my sister. She means the world to us,” he says, and I almost bark out a laugh from pure shock before he continues. “Osip and I are looking forward to working with you and your brothers in the coming years.” Giving a soft laugh, he adds, “I have a feeling it’s going to be very profitable for both our families.”

He smiles down at us, and I use all my years of pretending everything is fine to make my face a blank mask that would give Oksana a run for her money when she’s successfully snorted herself off to a happier place. I smile and raise my glass in a toast, drinking to a future I didn’t ask for and I sure as hell never wanted.

The guests smile and cheer and shout out their congratulations, and it’s absolutely fitting that a bunch of murdering, sex-trafficking assholes are toasting my forced nuptials. I down the champagne, hoping it’ll dull me enough to get through the next few hours. I smile as best I can, take drinks whenever a toast is given, and force my dry throat to swallow the food in front of me. By the time the wedding cake is brought out, I’m not sure how much more I can take.

My brothers are dead set on continuing the façade, so I bite back my groan when they insist Vitaly and I cut the cake together. The photographer that’s been hovering around on the outskirts starts clicking away again while I paste my smile on and follow my husband to the table that’s been set up.

He grabs the knife and looks over at me, raising a dark brow. “I think we’re supposed to do this part together.”

Reaching out, I place my hand on top of the tattooed one holding the large knife. I keep it there while he cuts the first slice. I pull my hand back when he’s finished, but I keep standing next to him. Thankfully, Konstantin seems content with that and doesn’t insist we feed one another. While the servers start cutting the rest and delivering it to the waiting guests, I stay where I’m at. Even with the heaters that have been set up, it’s still chilly, and when I start to shiver, Vitaly looks down at me, immediately noticing.

When he starts to remove his suit jacket, I quickly say, “It’s okay. You don’t have to do that.”

“You’re cold.”

It's all he says, like that's explanation enough, and within seconds his jacket is draped over my shoulders and I'm cocooned in his warmth. His body heat and cologne surround me, and I want to hate it, but it's oddly reassuring. No one's ever lent me a jacket because I'm cold, and I know he's probably only doing it out of habit or to put me at ease so I don't start crying and ruining the nice charade we have going on, but it's still nice, and I still appreciate it. I'm not stupid enough to think this means he's a nice guy, but it at least means he doesn't want me to stand here freezing, and that has to count for something.

"Thanks," I say, slipping my arms in the sleeves and pulling it closed across my chest.

He nods and leads me back to the table. After another hour that feels like it lasts an eternity, Roman looks at his wife, noticing the yawn she tries to hide. He kisses her forehead and looks over at Vitaly.

"I need to get her home. I think all the excitement has worn her out."

"Same here," Danil says and then turns to smile at Konstantin. "I don't know how you managed to put all this together so quickly, but I'm glad you did. Let me know when you're free to go over a few things."

Konstantin laughs. "Always thinking about work," he says with a small nod of approval. "I'm the same way. I'll be in touch soon. I see no reason to wait." He looks over at Vitaly, his smile growing. "I imagine the happy couple will be indisposed for a few days, but I'm ready to talk business when you are."

"We can start anytime," Vitaly says. "Like you, I see no reason to wait."

His callous dismissal of our early marriage bonding does not bode well. Although, I guess it's to be expected, and it's probably for the best. I've never had a fairytale idea of marriage, and being a wife isn't going to change that. It would be nice to have some idea of the man I'm married to, though. I was hoping for at least a polite conversation before I'm expected to get naked and spread my legs.

Konstantin studies Vitaly for a second before letting out another laugh and giving a shrug. "Sure. Give me a call tomorrow then. We can set up a time to meet."

"Sounds good," Vitaly says, rising as his brothers do the same. I stand while they shake hands. I'm completely caught off guard when Osip pulls me in for a hug.

“Keep him happy, Katya,” he growls in my ear. “And keep your fucking eyes open. We want to know more about these men.”

He doesn’t wait for a response, just lets me go and pushes me into Konstantin’s waiting embrace, because apparently we’ve just morphed into a hugging family.

“Time to make yourself useful, sister. Give him whatever he wants, and you’d better do it with a goddamn smile on your face.” Before I can pull away, he tightens his grip on me and hisses, “Not a word about our family.”

I nod because I know he won’t let me go until I do. I’m not only being sold off to a strange man, but I’m also expected to spy and report back anything suspicious to my brothers and keep my mouth shut about any Lebedev business, and if I fuck any of this up, some innocent woman will pay for it. Nothing is ever simple in my world.

When I pull back, Vitaly is watching me, running his eyes over my face and taking in every detail just like he’d done in the bathroom. Despite the chill in the air, he’s rolled up his white dress shirt, exposing his inked forearms. I can’t help but notice the veins running along his tanned skin, and I quickly look away. It’s odd as fuck being married to someone without even knowing the most basic details about them. I don’t even know how he takes his coffee or how old he is.

His brothers lead their wives away with Matvey trailing along behind them, and when Vitaly offers me his arm again, I give Oksana a quick hug goodbye and wish her luck before I turn and take my husband’s arm. It’s time to step into my new life.

Chapter 4

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Vitaly

Katya's touch on my arm is so light I can barely feel it. It's like she's trying her hardest to not touch me at all. I'm still trying to process the fact that I'm standing next to my wife. My *wife*. I've never even gone on a second date with a woman, and now I'm fucking married.

I look down at her, ignoring the fact that she's absolutely gorgeous. When I'd pulled the veil back and seen her face, it was like someone had reached in and stolen the air from my lungs. I couldn't breathe. The fact that she'd looked scared to death hadn't taken away from her beauty. If anything, it had just added to it, and I'd had the insane urge to pull her in for a hug and tell her that everything's going to be okay, that I'm not going to hurt her, and that she's safe with me. I can't imagine being the sister to Konstantin and Osip has been fun, and it's painfully obvious she's terrified of them. No matter how hard I try and tell myself that it's not my problem, it still doesn't sit well with me.

While the rest of my family gets into the SUV they arrived in, I lead Katya to my black Porsche. Opening the door for her, I help her in, making sure her dress is situated before walking to the driver's side. Konstantin had someone bring her bags out during the ceremony, so she's all packed up and ready to go. The band around my finger feels heavy and stifling, like a noose around my goddamn neck. I'm feeling a million different things at once, and I don't want to be feeling any of them.

When I start the car, Katya clasps her hands tightly together, looking so small and scared in my suit jacket that's way too big for her. She's my responsibility now. The guy who thinks taking a woman out to dinner is too big of a commitment is now married and joined to this woman.

Annulment, I remind myself. We're getting this erased from the record as soon as we have what we need from her brothers. She'll probably be more than happy to put this behind her, and then we can go on with our separate lives and never have to think about this again.

After several minutes of silence as I drive us through the city, I finally break it and ask, "You came here from Berlin?"

"Yeah, we just got here yesterday." She keeps staring out the window, not offering any more information.

"How do you like it here?" I ask, feeling every bit the dumbass as I struggle for something to talk about that will help make all of this seem not so fucking weird and awkward.

"I'm not really sure. The only other place I've seen is the airport."

"Did you know your brother was going to suggest this marriage?" I don't know why I'm asking. I don't really expect her to be honest about anything that has to do with her family, but she answers me all the same, and I find myself wanting to believe her.

"No, I had no idea. Konstantin told me yesterday before your family came over for supper." She lets out a sigh. "I guess you drew the short stick."

"What?"

"Konstantin said that there were two single Melnikov brothers. You're the one I married tonight, so I'm guessing you lost."

"I volunteered," I tell her, not bothering to add that it's because the other single Melnikov brother is in love with a woman her sick fuck of a brother kidnapped and trafficked.

We spend the rest of the ride in silence, and this time I don't break it. When I pull into my spot in the underground garage, the others are already inside, no doubt they sprinted to the elevator because they know what to say about as well as I do. This is the kind of awkward that no one wants to be a part of. Getting out, I open the door and help her stand before grabbing the suitcases from the back. She doesn't have much, just three suitcases and a backpack. Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I grab two suitcases while she pulls one of them behind her.

"You live in an apartment?"

I swipe my keycard to access our private elevator before we pile in. "We live in the penthouse."

"We?"

“Your brother really didn’t tell you anything, did he?”

“No.”

That one word tells an entire story. I look down at her, noticing the delicate crystals that have been woven into her honey blonde hair, the graceful line of her neck, and the small nose that turns up the tiniest bit at the end.

“I live here with my brothers and their wives.”

“They really married their pets?”

There’s something in her tone, but I can’t tell what it is. Confusion, maybe. Possibly a small hint of disgust.

“Not all of them, no. Roman is married to the mayor’s daughter.”

“But he has a pet, right?”

I meet her inquisitive blue eyes, and right before we reach the top floor, I say, “Right now he has a wife, a very pregnant one,” and leave it at that.

When the doors open, her eyes widen when she takes in the wall of family photographs. All our smiling faces look back at us, and I watch Katya’s brow scrunch in confusion as she tries to figure us out. Good luck with that one, wifey.

Not bothering to wait around, I start bringing her bags through the large penthouse. The others have completely bailed on us, so I look back at Katya who’s still staring at the photos.

“Come on. I’ll show you our room.”

Our room. I nearly choke on the damn words. I’ve never even spent an entire night with a woman, and now I’m living with one? My head is seconds away from exploding, and it has nothing to do with the massive hangover I’m still carrying around. Matvey and I had stayed up all night drinking, and I’d like nothing more than to grab another bottle and drink until the darkness swallows me up again.

Instead of doing that, I carry my wife’s luggage to what is apparently now *our* bedroom. She follows me, quietly looking around as we pass through the kitchen and living room. It’s an open floor plan, so she’s able to see everything.

I nod towards the hallway on the other side of the room. “That’s where Roman and Emily’s rooms are. Downstairs are Danil and Simona and also Matvey. We’re upstairs with Lev and Jolene.”

She doesn’t say anything, just follows behind me as I lead her upstairs. We pass the room we converted into a gym and the room that I know Lev

and Jolene are hiding behind. I think about banging on it as we walk by and calling him a chickenshit, but I don't. I'd probably hide, too, if I could.

Opening the door to our room, I step in and then set her bags down by the closet. She slowly steps in, looking around at everything but the large, king-sized bed. She eyes the floor-to-ceiling windows that show nothing but a dark sky and the faint glow of the city beneath us. Walking closer, she stops at the ridiculously comfortable rocking chair that sits in the corner. My brothers and I had gone baby shopping, and Matvey and I had meant to just buy three for our pregnant sisters-in-law, but once we'd sat in one, we'd quickly decided that we both needed one too. We'll be babysitting a lot, so it makes sense. Plus, it's just really comfortable.

She doesn't ask me about it, and I don't offer any information. I'm still going on the assumption that I can't trust her at all. I hadn't heard whatever the hell Konstantin and Osip had whispered to her before we left, but I'd seen her face when they released her. I'm willing to bet she's under strict orders to keep her brothers informed of anything she finds out about us.

"You can use as much of the closet as you need." Pointing to the door on the other side of the room, I add, "That's the bathroom. I can show you the rest of the place tomorrow. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm okay." Slipping out of my jacket, she holds it out to me. "I'll just get ready for bed, I guess."

I take my jacket and watch her grab the smallest suitcase and wheel it towards the bathroom before she shuts and locks the door. With a sigh, I toss my jacket on one of the other chairs and then kick off my shoes. Stepping into the closet, I quickly shed the tux that suddenly feels way too fucking tight and exchange it for a pair of grey joggers and a white T-shirt.

Pacing the room, I run a hand through my hair, wishing for the previous awkwardness of the car ride, because nothing is going to compare to what's about to happen. As if reading my thoughts, I hear the door click behind me. I turn around just in time to see Katya step out. She's wearing a pink robe that's belted at the waist. It's short enough to give me an eyeful of long, toned legs, but everything else is hidden. Her pink toenail polish stands out against the cream colored carpet and matches the robe she's still clutching shut.

"I'm sorry, but can you help me with these?" She motions toward the crystal pins that are still woven into her long hair. "I tried to get most of them, but I can't find them all."

She turns around when I step closer, and I try to ignore how damn vulnerable she seems with her robe wrapped tightly around her like armor and the loose curls of her hair resting softly against her back. Reaching up, I start to grab the pins in her hair, pulling out the sparkly crystals. I can't help but notice how damn soft her hair is. When the long locks start to loosen and fall, the scent of her fills my nose, and I nearly groan. She smells like vanilla, so fucking sweet I'm tempted to bend my head and take a bite out of her. I fucking love sweet things.

Running my fingers through her hair to try and find any remaining pins, I feel my cock start to harden, and I curse my body's lack of control. It's a normal reaction, I tell myself. It doesn't mean shit. She's beautiful and she smells yummy. Big fucking deal.

My fingers slide through the strands of her hair one last time before I say, "I think I got them all."

She turns around, taking the pins from my hand, and when her eyes drop and she sees the outline of my cock straining against my joggers, she sucks in a quick breath and takes a step back. It's not the kind of response I usually get from a woman. She doesn't look like she wants to rip my clothes off and fuck me. She looks terrified, and when her blue eyes meet mine, there's not a speck of lust in them. She's too busy being scared to death to be turned on.

"Can you please just go easy on me." She's clutching her robe with shaky hands, and the tone of her voice isn't husky with arousal. It's wobbly with fear.

It takes me a second to respond. I've never had anyone act like this around me, and I can't say I care for it. Gripping the back of my neck, I let out a sigh and meet her eyes.

"What exactly do you think I'm about to do?"

She blushes a deep red and glances over at the bed. "Aren't you? I mean...I just thought you wanted to," she gestures to the bed, "you know." She bites her bottom lip to stop her rambling.

I shake my head and let out a disgusted sigh. "So you thought I was just going to throw you on the bed and have my way with you?"

She seems surprised by the question, like it hadn't even occurred to her that I wouldn't be doing exactly that.

"I've never forced myself on a woman, and I'm sure as fuck not going to start on my goddamn wedding night."

“But I thought,” she starts to say, turning even redder before she finishes with a soft, “My brothers will expect it.”

“I want you to understand something very important, *wife*. Your brothers don’t have a say in what happens between us, and they sure as fuck don’t get a say in what happens in our bedroom. This is between us and no one else, and what happens in here, or what *doesn’t* happen in here, is no one’s business but ours.”

She pulls her frightened eyes from the bed and back to mine. “They won’t find out?”

“Not unless you tell them. Are you going to be telling them our secrets, Katya?”

“No,” she whispers, but I don’t trust her. Why the hell should I? I’ve known her for the exact length of our marriage, which isn’t saying much. Five hours may be the longest fucking relationship I’ve ever been in, but that doesn’t mean we have some sort of bond going on. She’s still eyeing me like I’m seconds away from ripping off her robe and tossing her on the bed for fuck’s sake.

I scrub a hand over my face, no longer able to deal with any of this. “Take the bed. I’ll be on the couch if you need anything.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she starts to say, but I wave my hand at her, too frustrated and tired to deal with this.

“I don’t want you worrying about me ripping your clothes off while you sleep. You need to rest, and you’ll do it better if I’m not here.”

She doesn’t argue with what I’ve said, so I turn and walk away, shutting the door behind me. Walking past the gym, I see Matvey hitting the bag, so I walk in and grab a bottle of water from the fridge we keep in here and then take a seat. He’s so into what he’s doing it takes him a few minutes to notice I’m here. When he does, he gives the bag one more hit, letting it swing on its chain before he drops his gloves and runs a hand through his sweaty hair. I toss him a water as he walks over.

“Going that well?”

I laugh and shake my head. “It’s exactly how I envisioned marriage being—absolutely fucking miserable and no one’s getting laid.”

Matvey shrugs and downs half his water. “Our brothers seem pretty happy.”

“They’re outliers. It’s not normal. The majority of married people are miserable.”

“She’s just scared.” He takes a seat next to mine and finishes his water. “Her only family is a couple of psychopaths who enjoy selling women. That can’t be easy to grow up around.”

“No, but she’s loyal to them, Matvey. There’s no way in hell she hasn’t been ordered to spy on us.”

“I know, and that’s why we’re not going to give her anything, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s scared to death and in a strange place with strange people.”

I try to ignore the guilt that’s starting to claw its way into me. He’s assuming she’s terrified, but I know for a fact that she is because I just saw it with my own eyes.

“She thought I was going to rape her,” I admit. “She begged me to go easy on her.”

“Fuck, man,” he groans. “I’m so sick of these bastards. I’m so fucking tired of having to be nice to them and pretend that I’m just as disgusting as they are. They make me fucking sick.”

“Me too, brother.” I throw my empty bottle of water, hitting the garbage can in the corner. “Soon we’ll get to kill them, and then we’ll never have to be around this shit again.”

“Can’t fucking wait.” Finishing his water, he looks back over at me. “I need to take a shower, but if you want, I can kick your ass in a game of pool when I get out.”

I know what he’s offering, and I’m grateful for it because I’m not ready to spend my wedding night on the couch. Standing up, I follow him out of the room.

“I’ll get it set up,” I tell him when we’re downstairs. I head into the room we’ve turned into a bit of a gaming room while he keeps going down the hall to his bedroom. Unable to resist, I walk over to the bar in the corner and pour myself a large drink. The vodka goes down even smoother tonight, and I’m already on my second drink by the time Matvey walks back in. He’s wearing joggers like me, but instead of a T-shirt, he’s wearing a hoodie. He doesn’t like to show his scars, even though he’s tattooed over all of them. I can see the colorful flames peeking out from the back of his sweatshirt and traveling up his neck to join the other tattoos that decorate his skin.

He pours himself a drink and tops off mine before grabbing one of the cue sticks I offer him. He’s right. I’m about to get my ass kicked. No one

beats Matvey at pool, but that's not why I'm down here playing a game with him. I want to not think about the woman who's scared and sleeping in my bed. I especially want to stop feeling like a jackass about the woman who's scared and sleeping in my bed. I tell myself I don't owe her a damn thing other than keeping her safe while she's in my care. That's way more than her brothers would do in this situation.

After four games and several more drinks, I'm still feeling lousy.

"Another?" Matvey asks, and I know he'd keep playing until the sun rises if I wanted him to, but I see how tired he is, and the exhaustion and alcohol are hitting me hard, too.

"Nah, I should get some sleep." I set my stick down and smile. "I think I was close to winning that last game."

Matvey shakes his head, giving me a hint of a smile. "It's kinda sad that you think that."

"I'm gonna pretend that I was close."

"That's even sadder."

I laugh and follow him out of the room. "Thanks, man," I tell him before starting up the stairs.

"Anytime, you know that."

"I know, brother. Thanks."

I walk on legs that were a lot steadier a few hours ago, and once I see the couch in the living room, I shake my head with a groan. I'm not ready to lay down on that damn thing, and I can't stop wondering about how Katya is doing. Convincing myself that I'll just take a quick peek to make sure she's okay, I start up the stairs. I'm probably not nearly as quiet or stealthy as I think I'm being as I open the door and slip into our bedroom. She doesn't wake up, though.

She's left the small lamp on the nightstand on, giving me a clear view of her. Her back is facing me, and she's curled up into a tiny ball with the covers pulled up to her neck. Honey blonde hair fans across the pillow, and my fingers move at my sides. The memory of those silky strands sliding along my skin hits me hard, and the scent of her immediately fills my nose. The sweetness making me want to run my tongue over her to see if she tastes as good as she smells.

Walking around the bed, I stop when I see something peeking out from the covers. Grabbing the end of it, I pull out a large sketchpad as a couple of charcoal sticks and colored pencils fall to the floor. Surprised, I lift it closer,

studying the large bird that fills the page. It's not the black swan of the Lebedev Bratva, but a different bird that I immediately recognize. I used to see them all the time in Moscow. She's managed to capture the Eurasian magpie perfectly, even down to the blue coloring she's added to its otherwise black and white body. The sketch is beautiful, and I'm surprised by how talented she is. I'm not the kind of guy who spends days walking through art museums, but even I can see the beauty in this drawing. It's so lifelike, and the mischievous glint she's managed to capture in its dark eyes is stunning.

Before I can think better of it, I pull out my phone and take a picture of the drawing. I'm not sure why I do it except that I like it and might want to look at it again. I really doubt she'll want to sit down with me and show me her drawings, so this may be the only chance I have. With that thought in mind, I start flipping through the sketchpad. It's filled with birds. She has several different species, but it's obvious the magpie is her favorite. I take a few more photos of my favorites before setting the pad back down on the bed. Katya lets out a soft moan and rolls over, stretching her arms above her head. Apparently, she'd fallen asleep while drawing because her right hand is covered in charcoal and now so are my sheets. She's also managed to smudge her cheek with it, and my desire to wipe it clean is strong enough to have me taking a step back.

Shaking my head to clear it, I grab an extra blanket from the closet and sit down in the rocking chair. Propping my feet on the ottoman, I sink back into the soft cushion, already feeling my eyes drift closed. There, a wedding night in a rocking chair isn't nearly as sad as a wedding night on the couch downstairs. Happy fucking marriage to me.

It doesn't take long at all for me to pass out, and when I wake, it's to an empty room. After several seconds of my sluggish brain remembering everything that happened last night, I slowly sit up and run a hand over my face. The sound of the shower lets me know where my significant other is, and a quick glance at the room shows me that she's made the bed and her sketchpad is nowhere in sight.

Standing up, I notice that she's unpacked. Her clothes hang in the closet like she's tried very hard to take up as little space as possible and to ensure that none of our belongings touch. One side is my dark suits and shirts, and the other side is a wall of various shades of pink and other feminine-looking colors. I run my hands over her clothes, pushing them apart when I spot a

short, light blue dress that I can't help but imagine on her curvy body. I hadn't been able to see much of her, first in the wedding dress and then in the robe, but I'd seen enough to know that I want to see more.

The sound of the bathroom door opening has me turning around. She steps out, and when she spots me, she brings a hand to her neck and quickly looks away. My eyes run over the pink sweater dress she's wearing. It's not skintight on her body, but it still makes my damn mouth water at the way it hugs her tits and accentuates the hips I'd very much like to dig my fingers into. I follow the line of her shapely legs, ending at her bare feet. I get another glimpse of her pink-painted toenails, and when she starts to fidget, shifting her weight from foot to foot, I realize I'm still staring like I'm trying to memorize every detail of her. Hell, maybe I am. I can't figure out what I'm feeling about her, and it confuses the fuck out of me.

"If you give me a few minutes to shower, we can go down and get some breakfast."

"Sure," she says, still avoiding my eyes. Before I can shut the door, she adds a quick, "Sorry you had to sleep in the chair last night."

"I chose to sleep in the chair. There was a perfectly good couch downstairs I could've used."

She surprises me by asking, "Why didn't you?"

I'm not sure what to say to that. "I knew you were upset. I didn't want you to wake up alone and in a strange place."

Before she can say anything, I step into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. Apparently our marriage, short as it may be, is going to be filled with awkward questions and quick escapes into the bathroom when those awkward questions can't be answered. Marital bliss, here we come.

Standing under the hot water, I will my headache to go away. I've got to stop drinking so damn much. Vodka is not going to solve my problems. I need to face this head-on and with a clear mind. Washing up quickly, I don't even bother to jerk off or shave. An orgasm would probably make me feel better, but I can't muster up the enthusiasm to put in the work required to get one. I try not to think about how goddamn depressing that is.

Noticing the new bottles lining the built-in shelf on the tiled wall, I can't resist reaching out and snooping. Shampoo, conditioner, and some sort of body wash. Opening the lid, I take a whiff and immediately wish I hadn't when my cock starts to harden. Goddamn vanilla and underneath that is

some sort of wildflower-type smell that I can only describe as fucking delicious.

Jesus Christ.

It doesn't matter that she smells good. I mean, most people do. It means nothing that the scent she chooses to wear makes me hard. Big fucking deal. Ignoring my obnoxious dick, I get my ass out of the shower and towel off. Throwing on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved black tee, I step out, determined to not start caring about the woman standing in front of me who smells like a freshly baked cookie and looks just as fucking delicious.

“Ready to eat?” I ask her, and when she gives a small nod and gets out of the rocker I’d slept in, we both head downstairs. I’m not at all surprised to see everyone lingering around the kitchen island, no doubt waiting to see if I’ve survived the night.

“Morning,” Roman says, pouring himself another cup of coffee before handing the pot to me. He lowers his voice so only I can hear and asks, “How’s it going?”

“Don’t ask,” I groan, filling my mug and then pouring another for Katya.

Roman gives a soft laugh and goes to stand next to Emily, who’s smiling up at Katya. “There’s plenty of breakfast left if you want some. We did pancakes and bacon this morning.”

“Thank you,” Katya says, speaking English again because she knows my brothers’ wives don’t speak Russian. Katya walks around to get some sugar for her coffee and when she goes for the milk, she stops when she sees the house rules on the fridge. It’s a very short list—no historical romances on movie nights and a vetoed rule that makes it clear blowjobs in the kitchen are allowed and quite possibly encouraged. The corner of her mouth curls up the tiniest bit before she mutters, “Good to know,” and then opens the door to get the milk.

When I look over, Lev lifts a pierced brow at me in a *hey, maybe you’ll get lucky and get one of those late-night kitchen blowjobs*. I discreetly flip him the bird and ignore the soft laugh he gives. Grabbing two plates, I hand one to Katya and help her fix a plate. We take two stools at the end of the island and pretend that everyone isn’t staring at us.

I look over and notice that Katya keeps looking over at my brothers, watching the way Roman keeps a protective hand on Emily’s belly, the way Lev kisses Jolene’s forehead, and the way Danil keeps smiling at Simona.

Matvey's at the end, eating a giant bowl of sugary cereal, but she shoots him a few curious looks too.

"Do you want any more?" I ask when her plate is empty.

"No, thanks. I'm good."

I grab our plates and start to clean up as she scoots off the stool and follows me. One minute I'm rinsing off plates, and the next I look up just in time to see Simona accidentally knock a mug over. As soon as it shatters on the hard floor, Katya steps forward in a panic, not seeming to notice or care that her feet are getting cut.

"I'm sorry," she quickly says.

"Katya, don't move." I step closer, grimacing when she moves her feet again and I see drops of blood on the floor.

She turns a pair of wild, blue eyes up at me. "It was my fault, not hers."

I raise a hand in what I hope is a *calm the fuck down* gesture. "No, I'm pretty sure Simona broke the mug, but it was just an accident."

Katya looks back at Simona, eyeing her pregnant belly. "No, it was my fault." Then she looks up at Danil, who's looking just as confused as I feel. "Don't hurt her. It was my fault."

"Why would I hurt her?"

Katya looks back at me, trying like hell to understand. "But she's his pet."

"No," Danil gently tells her. "She's my wife, and I don't hurt her."

I don't even feel like cracking a joke about their soundproofed room and the butt cushion I bought for her after he spanked her ass because she put her life in danger to try and save him. Looking down at the bloody footprints, I know I can't take any more of watching her cut her feet. Stepping closer, I scoop her into my arms, making sure the arm I have under her thighs is also keeping her sweater dress tucked in so she's not flashing everyone.

Her blue eyes turn to mine. "What are you doing?"

"You're cutting your feet. We need to get them bandaged."

"But the glass," she starts to say, but Roman cuts her off.

"Don't worry, Katya. We'll get it cleaned up."

She looks at him, still obviously confused by my brothers' behavior. I tell him thanks and carry Katya back upstairs. She doesn't resist being in my arms, but she also doesn't settle in against me or go out of her way to touch me. It's more like she endures it, and I tell myself I don't care.

I pass back through our room and into the bathroom before setting her down on the large counter. She scoots sideways so I can put her legs up. The cuts are still bleeding, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

“What in the hell possessed you to walk through fucking glass?”

When she doesn’t say anything, I give a harsh laugh and shake my head. “No, you don’t get to stay silent on this one. I want to know why you did it.”

She waits a few seconds, and I know she’s weighing her words, trying to decide how honest to be with me. “I didn’t want Simona to get in trouble for it. She’s pregnant. The beating wouldn’t hurt me as badly.”

“The beating?” I ask, barely getting the words out. A flash of rage burrows itself inside me, slowly building to something that threatens to overwhelm me when I ask, “Do your brothers beat you?”

“No,” she quickly says.

“Do they allow others to beat you?”

“No, they don’t. I promise.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you think Danil would beat his wife?”

“She’s his pet. I saw her tattoo.”

“So your brothers have pets that they beat?”

She clamps her mouth shut at that question, which is more than answer enough. Not wanting to push her too far, I give up the questions for now and look down at the feet that are dripping blood into the sink.

“I need to clean these cuts and make sure there isn’t any glass in them.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

Grabbing a cloth and the small first-aid kit I keep under the sink, I run some warm water and start to look at her feet. The cuts aren’t deep enough to need stitches, but I know it hurts, and I know it’s going to hurt worse when I start digging around to look for glass. It bothers me more than it should. I’m not even remotely squeamish, and I’ve killed men in ways that would make sane men vomit, but somehow the sight of her blood is upsetting to me.

“I’ll try to make this as painless as possible,” I tell her.

She gives me a quick nod, face flushed and fingers fidgeting with the bottom of her sweater. It has not escaped my notice that it’s ridden up a bit, revealing more of those thighs I’m dying to explore. Her legs are shapely and look like they’d feel pretty damn good to have wrapped around my waist.

Pushing the thought aside, I run the warm cloth over the first foot and then slowly start inspecting each cut for tiny shards of glass. When I spot one, I grab the tweezers and remove it while she gives a soft whimper that goes straight to my dick. Raising my eyes to hers, I watch her parted lips suck in another lungful of air, and when her tongue peeks out to wet her bottom lip, I nearly let out a whimper of my own.

Forcing my attention back to her foot, I finish my inspection before checking the other one. When I spot another sliver of glass, she lets out another soft moan and tries to jerk her foot away. I grip her ankle to stop her, but she's still wiggling, and the movement causes her dress to rise up even more, and when I catch sight of a pink pair of panties, I forget what the hell I'm supposed to be doing. I'm frozen in place by a pair of fucking pink, cotton panties. I've seen women in all kinds of lingerie, and none of it has ever affected me like this.

Maybe it's the modest innocence of it, maybe it's knowing that beneath that thin scrap of fabric is an untouched pussy, or maybe it's the small wet stain I see blooming between her thighs the longer I keep staring. I'm guessing it's a combination of all three. The perfect trifecta that makes me want to kneel between her spread thighs and beg her for the opportunity to bury my head between her legs.

"Vitaly," she whispers, drawing my eyes back up to hers. Her blue eyes still look scared, but there's something else there now, something that has my cock straining against my jeans and my heart rate speeding up.

I can't fuck her. I scream the words in my head over and over again and force my eyes away from hers and back to her bleeding feet.

"Try to hold still for me." I grab the tweezers again, but before I can pull out the piece of glass, she tries to wiggle away again. "Katya, I have to pull this out."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"How long have you been drawing?" I ask, trying to take her mind off what I'm about to do.

"You saw my sketchpad?"

"I did last night, yeah. You're very talented. I really liked the magpie."

"You did?"

She seems so surprised by it that I briefly look up to meet her eyes before looking back at the cut with the small piece of glass sticking out of it. "I did, yes. I remember seeing them in Moscow all the time."

“They’re my favorite bird.” She hisses out a breath when I start to pull the piece of glass out.

“Why?”

“They’re really smart.”

I can tell she wants to say more. I lift a brow at her. “And?”

She winces when I pull the shard of glass out. “And they can recognize themselves in mirrors.”

“And?” I ask, trying to hide my smile because I can tell she’s avoiding telling me why she’s really drawn to them.

“And they mourn when their mate dies,” she finally says.

“They do?”

“Yeah, they mate for life, and when one of them dies, they’ll act differently, and they even sing a special mourning song.” She gives a small shrug. “I always thought that was really sweet, to have someone love you so much that they’ll mourn you when you’re gone.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I don’t say anything. The fact that there’s been so little love in her life that she finds the idea sweet that someone would actually mourn the death of someone else bothers me way more than it should. I didn’t grow up with loving parents, and I’ve never been in love, but I’ve always been surrounded by it because of my brothers. We may not say it or get all lovey-dovey with hugs, but it’s definitely there. I’d die for any one of them without a second thought, and I know with absolutely certainty that they’d do the same for me, but Katya’s never had anything like that.

“What happened to your parents?”

“They were killed by a rival Bratva when I was ten. My brothers raised me.”

“What the hell did they do to you?” The question is out before I can stop it, and she looks just as surprised by it as I am.

“Nothing,” she quickly whispers, trying to tug her foot free again so she can get down and run away from me and the questions she doesn’t want to answer.

“Relax, I’m not going to force you to tell me, but I hope one day you’ll choose to.”

What the fuck did I just say?

One day?

That almost sounds like future talk, and that's not at all what this arranged marriage is about. It doesn't matter that I'm curious or that I'd like her to trust me enough to tell me the truth. None of that fucking matters. What does matter is the phone call I'm about to make to her brother to set up a time to meet so we can start infiltrating their Bratva and we can find out where Alina is.

I need to get my head back into the fucking game and far away from this vanilla-scented woman with wet, pink panties and eyes that look like they've seen way too much sadness and pain.

I have a feeling that's going to be easier said than done.

“All right, *ptichka*, time to clean these cuts.”

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Chapter 5

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Katya

Little bird.

The nickname rolls off his tongue like he's been calling me that for years, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he's just as surprised to hear it come out of his mouth as I am. I make sure my dress is pulled down enough when he carefully dabs at my cuts with the cloth before grabbing the medicine.

"This might sting," he says, smiling when he sees the look I give him. "Okay, it's probably going to sting like hell, but we've got to disinfect these."

I try not to think about how damn gorgeous he is when he smiles. He's gorgeous all the time, but Vitaly smiling takes sexy to a whole new level. The man is breathtaking, and when I think about the way he'd been staring up my dress, my whole body starts to heat up again. I still don't understand him. He's not at all the monster I was expecting, and I can't figure out if it's all a show or not. None of his brothers seem like Konstantin and Osip, though. When I'd mentioned Danil beating Simona, they'd all looked appalled at the very idea. The women don't act scared, and they do things that Oksana and the women who have been my brothers' pets over the years would never do. Konstantin would've beaten the hell out of Simona for dropping that mug, pregnant or not, and he would've also beaten Jolene and Emily just for daring to look him in the eyes. I don't understand the Melnikov family, and it worries me. I don't like not knowing who I can and can't trust. Back home it was easy. Don't trust anyone. But here things are all mixed up.

The sting of the medicine pulls my attention back to the present moment and stops my frantic thoughts. I hiss out a breath when he dabs on some more.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, keeping his touch gentle as he puts more medicine on, making sure the cuts are all cleaned and not in danger of becoming infected. I feel his scarred hands against my skin as he holds my foot.

“Can I ask what happened to your hands?”

His whiskey-colored eyes meet mine. “I was in a fire when I was fifteen.”

He doesn’t elaborate, and it feels too invasive to push him for details, so I just say a quick, “I’m sorry. That must’ve been awful.”

He gives me a small nod before grabbing some bandages and going back to doctoring my feet. When he goes to disinfect the last cut, I let out another hiss at the sharp sting, he leans in closer and blows out a breath against my skin. The warmth of it sends a shiver down my spine, and a soft moan escapes before I can stop it. Our eyes lock, and when I feel the heat of his breath again, I try not to squirm. With his hand cupping my foot and his mouth so close to my skin while my dress keeps trying to ride up and I can feel my panties soaking in real time, it’s the most intimate moment I’ve ever had in my life. I’m used to men pretending I don’t exist and going out of their way to make sure they don’t look at me, but Vitalic’s not doing any of that. His amber eyes are studying every detail of me, and I feel completely exposed and laid bare. It’s too much, so I look away, breaking whatever kind of hold he just had over me.

Without a word, he starts bandaging my feet, and when every cut is covered, he gives the top of my foot a soft squeeze and says, “Don’t move.”

I watch him walk out of the bathroom, unable to keep my eyes from roaming over the broad pair of shoulders, trim waist, impossibly firm ass, and muscular thighs. If he looks this good in clothes, I can’t imagine what kind of godlike beauty he is when naked. I’d seen enough last night when he’d been hard and wearing grey sweatpants to know the man is packing some serious dick. I know how damn lucky I am that he hadn’t forced anything last night, because I doubt I’d even be able to walk today if he had. My body might be responding to him, but that doesn’t change the fact that I was terrified last night, and I’m still carrying around a healthy dose of fear. I’m still working through my feelings for him when he walks back in carrying a pair of thick socks.

“This should help a little bit,” he says, carefully slipping the large socks on my feet. He hands me two pills and a bottle of water. “So should this.”

I eye the pills in my palm.

“Aspirin,” he says, lifting a brow at me. “Not roofies or whatever the hell else you think I’d slip you.”

“I didn’t think you were slipping me a roofie.” At least I’m pretty sure I wasn’t thinking that. I swallow the pills and set the water down.

He apparently doesn’t believe me. “You have severe trust issues, but I guess that’s to be expected.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I’m not surprised you don’t trust easily with Konstantin and Osip as your brothers.”

“And you think you’re better than them?” I can’t keep the frustration out of my voice, even though warning bells are loudly ringing in my ears, trying to get me to shut the hell up. “Last I heard you were in the same business as my brothers, and you own a club that I’m guessing is involved in way more than just stripping.”

Vitaly rests a hand on either side of me, caging me in with his powerful body. Leaning in close so our faces are only inches apart, his eyes narrow in anger. “I’m nothing like your brothers, *ptichka*.”

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, wishing he’d back up just a little bit, because I can’t think when he’s this close.

“You don’t need to. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

Without a word, he scoops me into his arms again and carries me to the bed. He sets me down and then hands me the remote to the large flat-screen TV hanging on the opposite wall.

“Where’s your sketchpad?”

I point to the bag sitting in the corner. He goes and gets it and then sets it on the bed next to me.

“Need anything else?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to call your brothers for a meeting, and you need to stay off your damn feet.”

“Right, my brothers,” I say, settling back against the pillows, “to discuss the business that you all share.”

Ignoring the angry look he gives me, I click on the TV and start scrolling to see what I can stream. I shouldn’t push him, but part of me

wants to know what will happen when he gets really pissed. At some point, he's going to have to drop the nice guy mask. I need to know what kind of monster he is. If I don't know my boundaries, then I'll never be able to survive this. With my brothers I knew exactly what to do and what not to do, but with Vitaly I have no idea, and it's driving me crazy.

Before he walks away, a moment of pure panic hits me when I realize what I might've just done. Here I'm all alone, and I just need to worry about getting my own ass in trouble, but if my brothers think that I'm being anything but the perfect wife they want me to be, then it won't be me that pays the price.

"Wait," I quickly say, reaching out to grab his wrist. His eyes widen slightly in surprise, but he doesn't pull away, probably because of the death grip I have on him. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"For talking back and being willful and for not doing anything last night."

He studies me for a few seconds, and I've never felt so much like I was under a microscope. I swear he can read every damn thought that's going through my very confused mind.

"What made you say that?"

"It just hit me what an ass I was being."

He lets out a soft laugh. "Nice try. You want to tell me the truth now?"

I sigh while I debate how much truth to give him. "Can I ask something of you?"

"Depends on what it is."

My fingers still grip his wrist when I meet his eyes and say, "If you're ever upset with me about anything, will you give me your word that you'll just punish me for it?" When he doesn't say anything, I quickly add, "I promise I won't complain or try to fight back or anything, just please don't tell my brothers."

After several very awkward seconds of silence, he shakes his head and says, "I don't even know what in the fuck to say to that. You told me your brothers never hurt you, but they hurt someone else, didn't they?"

When I don't say anything, he places his hand on top of mine. The scarred palm is oddly reassuring, but I still can't seem to loosen my grip.

"I meant what I said last night. Our marriage is not their business, *ptichka*. They won't hear any details from me. As far as punishing you

goes,” he pauses and gives a soft shake of his head again, “I will never hurt you. I can’t force you to believe me, but you have my word that no harm will ever come to you while you’re my wife, and I’m sure as fuck not going to hurt someone else if I get angry with you.”

Reaching out, he very lightly brushes a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m not angry at you, by the way. I never was.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond. His fingers graze the skin of my cheek in a featherlight touch that leaves my heart racing as he pulls back and out of my grasp. He’s out the door before I can even think to say anything.

Tossing the remote aside, I close my eyes and try to relax. My life has felt like it’s been spinning out of control since I was twelve years old, and I’ve managed to survive that, so I sure as fuck can survive being married to a gorgeous man who confuses me at every turn.

With my mind racing like it is, there’s only one thing I can do to calm it. I grab my bag and pull out the smaller sketchpad, the one I always keep hidden, the one I fill with all the drawings that I don’t ever want anyone else to see. After Konstantin made me watch him kill a woman, I knew I would lose my mind if I didn’t have an outlet, if I didn’t have something that allowed me to get out everything that I was feeling, so I started drawing all the things that played in a repeating loop in my mind, threatening to drive me insane. I’ve filled several of these smaller pads over the years, and when I reach for the most recent one, my chest starts to feel a little lighter.

This is my therapy, the only thing in my life that’s ever made me feel truly happy, and I need it now more than I ever have. Grabbing my charcoal pencils, I flip to a blank page and start drawing. With the first stroke, I feel my body relax. A pleasant numbing sensation settles over me and I gladly give in to it, losing myself to everything except the dark lines taking shape on the page before me. I’m not at all surprised that it’s Vitaly’s face I’ve chosen to draw. I capture the way he’d looked when he was bandaging my feet, the concern and worry in his beautiful eyes and the way his full lips had been stretched into a tight line. When I’m finished, I keep going. I draw the way he looks when he smiles, the beautiful tattooed hands that make my breath catch in my throat every time he touches me with them, and the way he’d looked this morning when I’d woken up to find him sleeping in the rocking chair.

By the time I set the sketchpad aside, my hand aches and I feel lighter somehow. Nothing's changed, nothing has been resolved, but I feel better after getting him down on paper. The soft knock at the door has me shoving the pad back in my bag and grabbing the bigger one that has all my bird drawings.

"Yeah?" I ask, looking over when the door opens and Emily pokes her head in.

"Hey, I just wanted to check on you and make sure you're okay."

She takes a cautious step inside, and when I see Simona and Jolene hovering in the doorway, I smile and wave them in. "I'm okay."

When Emily sees the drawing on my bed, her whole face lights up. I look down, seeing the pair of bluebirds I'd drawn a while ago.

"Did you do these?"

"Yeah." I fidget with the pencil in my hand. Aside from Vitaly, no one's ever really looked at my drawings. My brothers didn't care enough to want to see them, and Simeon just didn't give a shit.

"These are amazing," Emily says, holding it up so the others can see. She turns back to me with an excited look on her face. "Do you think you could paint some of these on a wall?"

"Yeah, I guess," I say, wondering what she's getting at. I don't usually paint, but I've done it before and enjoyed it, and I've drawn these birds enough times by now that I feel pretty confident I could replicate them with paint.

"Would you be interested in painting our nursery?" she asks and then quickly adds, "I mean, you don't have to, please don't think you have to say yes, but these are amazing, and I think it would look so cute in the nursery." She pats her pregnant belly. "We recently found out we're having a boy."

"Congratulations," I tell her.

Simona laughs and walks over to the rocking chair. "They all went out baby shopping last month, and Vitaly and Matvey got us each one of these chairs, but they decided they both needed one, too, for when they babysit." She plops down in it, resting her hand on her smaller baby bump.

I try to imagine Vitaly out baby shopping and then being so excited about babysitting that he decides to buy himself a rocking chair. I'm surprised by how easy the image comes to mind. I can easily imagine his smiling face getting excited about his future nephew, and I find myself getting a little jealous. I may be married to the man, but I'm pretty sure he

doesn't even like me. The women around me know him far better than I do, and he shares parts of himself with them that he'll most likely never share with me.

"What's he like?" I ask, unable to hold back my curiosity.

"Who? Vitaly?" Simona asks.

I nod while she thinks about what to say. "He's very funny," she says, smiling at some memory she has of him.

"Yeah, he's always the one cracking jokes," Emily says.

"He's also really nice," Jolene says. "He's very close to his brothers."

"And he hates historical romances," Emily says with a laugh. "They all do."

I wait a second, thinking about everything they've said as I try to piece together an accurate image of my husband. "Does he have a temper?"

I see Emily and Jolene share a quick look before Emily says, "Vitaly would never hurt you."

It's an evasive answer, but like before, they don't seem scared of these men at all. I've never been around women who acted like this. They don't lower their eyes or bow their heads. They don't act timid, they aren't walking around like they're sore, and I don't see any bruises.

"I don't understand any of this," I admit.

Jolene pats my leg. "It's okay. Just keep an open mind. You can trust Vitaly. We wouldn't lie to you about that."

Years of mistrust make it impossible for me to just blindly trust her, but I smile and give her a soft nod anyway because I appreciate what she's trying to do. Needing to do something other than sit here and worry, I look over at Emily and ask, "When do you want me to get started?"

"Really?" Her excited grin has me smiling in return. "Can you walk? Maybe you should rest for a few days."

"I'm going to go crazy if I sit in this bed all day."

"I understand that," Jolene says. "Come on, we can help you get downstairs."

My feet sting like they're on fire, but with one hand on the railing and the other gripping Jolene for support, we manage to get my ass downstairs. I freeze when I see the four armed men standing in the kitchen.

"It's okay," Jolene says, giving me a worried look. "They're just here to watch over everything while the guys are gone."

Looks like I won't be free of Simeon-like men after all. When I look over at them, I'm not met with indifferent, hard looks. They're all four looking at me, but they're also smiling. It's not a face-lit-up kind of smile, but it's friendly and nonthreatening.

"This is Sergei, Aleksandr, Grigori, and Feliks," Emily says, pointing them out one by one. "I'm not sure how Feliks' gaming skills are, so I'm not sure yet if we can kick his ass as easily as we do the others, but I'm guessing we could probably take him."

Simona laughs while the guys shake their heads.

"No way," Sergei tells her. "Last time was pure luck."

"And the time before that?" Emily asks.

Grigori laughs and elbows Sergei. "She's got us there."

"Whatever, we've got Feliks now." He looks over and nods his head at me. "How about it, Katya? You any good?"

"At what?"

"Video games," he says, but I can tell by the smile on his face that I've already answered his question.

"I've never played," I admit.

Emily smiles at me. "I bet she's a fast learner."

Aleksandr laughs. "You better hope so."

I feel like I've been picked up and dropped on some strange planet. Who the fuck are these people? Bratva members that are laughing and joking around with the women and none of them are acting violent or pervy, what the hell kind of Bratva is this?

When the men start to act like they're going to follow us, Simona waves a hand at them to stop. "No worries, guys. We're just going to the nursery for a bit. Nothing scary or dangerous, I promise."

The men stay where they're at, but I notice the laptop sitting on the counter, and when I hobble past it, I catch a glimpse of various security camera feeds, letting me know this place is pretty well guarded. With slow steps that send sparks of pain through my sore feet, I follow the others to the nursery. It's recently been painted and the light blue color will make the perfect backdrop for what's already taking shape in my head.

"What do you think?" Emily asks.

I spin around in a slow circle. There are two full blank walls across from each other. One of the others is broken up by the closet, and the wall

on my left has two large windows and built-in shelves beneath it with a bench seat on top.

Reaching into the bag I have slung over my shoulder, I take out my pad and pencils and sit on the floor. “Let me show you what I’m thinking,” I tell her as my pencil flies across the paper, giving her a very rough, very quick sketch of what I’m envisioning. When I hold it out to her, her mouth drops open and she reaches for the paper.

“I love it,” she says, holding it up for the others to see.

“Oh my god, can you do our nursery next?” Simona asks.

“Sure,” I say, feeling useful for the first time in my life. Well, useful in a real way, not in the *let’s marry you off to help our Bratva* kind of way. “Do you know what you’re having yet?”

Her hand rests on her baby bump when she says, “Not yet, but we have an appointment coming up, so hopefully we’ll find out.”

“I think it’s a girl,” Emily says, gently elbowing Simona’s arm.

“Maybe, but a little boy would be so cute, too, and our boys would have so much fun playing together.”

“God, that would be cute,” Emily agrees, and the smile on her face makes it obvious that she’s already picturing their sons running around together.

“I think Lev has his heart set on a girl.” Jolene gives a soft laugh. “I mean, I’m just basing this on all the little pink sleepers he keeps secretly buying.”

Emily snorts out a laugh. “That’s really cute.”

We keep planning and talking until it’s time for lunch, and when we wander into the kitchen, the guys are still waiting and watching the laptop to make sure everything looks okay. Jolene starts grabbing sandwich supplies from the fridge while Emily grabs the bread and I try to not get in anyone’s way. When I see the tomatoes on the counter, I rinse them off and grab a knife. I can at least do this.

“So how’s it going with Anya?” Simona asks Aleksandr.

He groans and scrubs a hand through his light beard. “I should’ve never told you about her.”

“He saw her last night,” Sergei says, ratting his friend out with a smug grin.

Simona’s eyes widen with excitement. “At the club or somewhere else?”

I start cutting tomato slices while I watch the strange scene unfolding before me. I keep waiting to see a flash of anger in one of the men's eyes or a sign of fear from the women, but there's nothing. They act like friends, and even though the men keep a constant eye on the laptop screen and they're all four wearing guns that I can easily see, the atmosphere feels laid-back. Aside from me, there's nothing tense or nervous about this group.

While Aleksandr talks about the girl he likes, it becomes obvious that she's a dancer at the club. It doesn't take a genius to figure out which club they're talking about, but I ask anyway.

"She works at Pink?"

They all turn to look at me.

"Yeah, she's one of the dancers," Emily says. "Aleksandr's been trying to work up the courage to ask her out."

"She's beautiful. It's intimidating," he says in his own defense while the other guys laugh.

"Of course she's beautiful," Sergei says. "That's the only kind of woman he'll hire."

He is obviously my husband, and the reminder that he not only owns a strip club but personally sees to it that it's only filled with the most beautiful of women is the reality check I need. I can't afford to get sidetracked by trying to see something that's not there. He's been sweet to me, and his family seems really amazing, but the truth of the matter hasn't changed at all. He's involved in sex trafficking and he owns a strip club that's probably filled with trafficked and abused women.

"Well, that's just standard for the business," Emily quickly says and then changes the subject and starts asking who wants turkey and who wants ham.

By the time I hear the elevator ding, we've already finished lunch and the kitchen's almost cleaned up. Our guards for the afternoon nod their goodbyes as they turn to leave, stopping to have a quick word with Danil before getting into the elevator.

"Babe!" I hear Emily yell before she runs to Roman. He looks horrified at the sight of his very pregnant wife doing more than a slow, cautious walk and quickly reaches out to grab her.

"*Solnishka*, are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

He calls her little sun and looks at her like she's his reason for breathing, and I'm officially done trying to make sense of the Melnikovs.

“We need to get some painting supplies,” she tells him.

“I already painted, baby. Did you change your mind?”

“Please don’t say you changed your mind,” Lev groans, but he’s smiling while he does it. “I don’t think Roman can handle another painting project.”

“No, I love the blue paint,” she reassures her husband with a pat to his chest. “But it just so happens that Katya is an amazing artist, and she’s agreed to spruce it up a bit.”

“Really?” Roman asks, looking over at me.

“I don’t know about amazing, but as long as you’re okay with it, I’d be happy to paint some stuff.”

Roman leans down and kisses Emily. “Whatever my wife wants, my wife gets.”

“She’s doing ours next,” Simona tells Danil.

He looks over at me. “Thanks. I can’t wait to see it.”

Lev picks up Jolene, giving her ass a good squeeze in the process. “What about us, *malinkaya*?”

Jolene smiles and leans in to kiss his lip piercing, and I swear this giant wall of muscle fucking melts at her touch. “I want to wait until we know if it should be pink walls or blue.”

He smiles and whispers something against her lips that makes her blush and give him another kiss. I turn away, feeling like I’m invading on a private moment, and when Matvey leans against the counter near where I’m standing, I ask quietly in Russian, “Where’s Vitaly?”

His dark eyes meet mine before he says, “He needed to go to the club to get some work done.” Glancing down at my feet, he adds in his gravelly voice, “You should stay off those. He’ll be upset if they start bleeding again.”

He hears the huff of air I let out, because, yeah, I’m sure Vitaly’s at the strip club worrying his fine ass off at the idea that my feet might still be achy. I bet the poor guy can barely concentrate on all the tits and ass that are being thrown in his face. I don’t even know why I’m getting pissed. It’s not like this is a real marriage. It’s an alliance, nothing more.

I walk past him and grab a pen and piece of paper so I can make a list of the supplies I’ll need, and as soon as I’m finished, Emily grabs it and gives her husband a hopeful look. He laughs and kisses her forehead.

“Looks like we’re going shopping.”

After they've left, Danil picks Simona up and says, "You need a nap, *sladkaya*."

"But I'm not tired."

He gives her a wink. "You will be."

Before I've even turned my head back around, I have just enough time to see Lev carrying a smiling Jolene back upstairs. I look at Matvey.

"Is it always like this?"

"Pretty much."

While he grabs a drink from the fridge, I run my eyes over him, starting at the black boots and ending with the black hoodie. I can see tattoos covering his neck, disappearing under his shirt, and when I look at his hands, I see a familiar set of scars covering them. They're worse than the ones on Vitaly, but they're definitely burn scars. I want to ask if he was in the same fire, but there's something about Matvey that doesn't invite questions. He's more guarded than the others, so it surprises me when he says, "Can I see what you're going to do in the nursery?"

"Sure."

He follows me back down the hall, and even though he sees how carefully I'm walking, he doesn't offer me his hand. Stepping into the nursery, I grab the sketch I'd made and hand it to him.

"It's rough, but it gives you an idea of what I'm thinking about doing."

"You're very talented." He hands me back the drawing and walks over to the window.

"How did Vitaly end up getting stuck with me?" I ask, bending down to grab my bag so I can get a pencil. "I asked him if he drew the short stick, but he said he volunteered. I find that hard to believe."

He's quiet so long I'm convinced he's not going to answer, but he finally says, "It was never a choice. It had to be him."

I meet his dark eyes. "Why?"

Instead of answering, he glances down at the pencil in my hand. "You going to start planning it out on the walls?"

I look at Matvey and then I think about the whiskey-colored eyes that keep haunting my thoughts. Matvey's gorgeous, I'd have to be blind not to see that, but my body doesn't respond to him like it does Vitaly, and Matvey's not looking at me like he's even remotely interested in me sexually.

When it's obvious we aren't about to have a big heart-to-heart and share all our deepest secrets, I step closer to the wall and raise my pencil. Putting all my focus on the drawing I want to bring to life, I start sketching a large tree. It takes a while, and I've completely forgotten about Matvey until I hear him sit down on the window seat behind me. Ignoring him, I roughly outline several birds sitting on one of the tree branches.

Like usual when I start drawing, I completely lose track of time, and when Roman and Emily walk in, I'm almost finished with the wall.

"Wow," Roman says, running his eyes over what I've done.

"It'll look better once it's painted," I say, hoping they can look beyond the rough lines.

"Are you kidding? It already looks amazing," Emily says.

Roman sets down all the supplies they bought and then starts unfolding a sheet to protect the carpet. Matvey helps him and then carries in a chair and a stepladder.

"If you don't rest those feet, Vitaly's going to kick all our asses," he tells me, setting the chair down in front of me.

"Sure he will," I say, but I sit and start going through the supplies. They've gotten everything on my list, plus extras. "This is perfect. Thanks for getting it all."

"Let us know if you need anything else," Roman tells me. "And don't work yourself too hard." He rests a hand on Emily's belly. "We still have a couple of months before he gets here."

"I won't," I tell him, but the truth is I'm dying for a distraction to lose myself in, and this is exactly what I need.

I start mixing paints, and when it becomes obvious that I've completely zoned out, the others start to trickle out of the room, leaving me to create something beautiful for a little baby boy I may never meet. Oksana is about to lose her usefulness to Konstantin, and there's no telling what Vitaly's plans are for me once everything is in place with my brothers. I hope whoever this little boy grows up to be that he'll at least get some happiness out of looking at the paintings I've left for him.

Several hours later, Emily tries to get me to come out and eat supper, but I refuse, so she eventually gives up and brings me a plate of food. I take a few bites, but I'm in a good groove, and I don't want to lose it, so I keep painting, not stopping until I look up to see Vitaly's pissed-off face in the doorway.

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Chapter 6

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Vitaly

I stare at Katya, eyeing the sore feet that she's defiantly standing on despite my order to stay in the goddamn bed, and to top it all off, there's a plate of food sitting on the floor that's barely been touched.

She looks over at me, eyes wide with fear and different shades of colored paint dotting her face where she's unknowingly marked herself while deep in thought. She looks fucking adorable, and that just irritates me all the more.

"They said I could do it," she quickly says, glancing at the tree she's been painting for the last several hours. It looks fucking amazing, and I'm once again stunned by her talent. The tree covers the wall, branches reaching up and out, and she's dotted one of them with several colorful birds.

"You think I'm upset because you're painting a beautiful picture for my nephew?" I ask, raising a brow at her.

She shifts her weight from foot to foot, wincing when it irritates her cuts. I point at her feet, glad that she at least had enough sense to keep my socks on.

"I told you to rest."

"I was bored."

"I don't care."

"Of course you don't care," she huffs out, turning back to the wall and giving me her back. "You were too busy spending the day with your strippers."

The corner of my mouth lifts at her attitude. I like seeing glimpses of who she is beneath the fear that usually keeps her tongue in check.

"I had some things I needed to take care of," I tell her, stepping closer.

She ignores me and keeps painting. When I grab her wrist, stilling the brush midstroke, she lets out a frustrated growl that goes straight to my damn dick. Ever since I left the penthouse I've been soft, but one angry huff out of her and I'm hard as fucking steel. It's annoying, and it's making me cranky.

"I want to keep working," she argues, trying to break from my hold, but there's no chance in hell that's happening.

"Tough shit, *ptichka*."

Wrenching the paintbrush from her hand, I drop it next to the others, but when she starts having a fit about properly storing the brushes, I hold up my hands and step back so she can store her supplies how she wants. She wraps them up how she wants them, and when she's satisfied, she takes one last look at the wall.

"It wouldn't take me long at all to finish up that last bird," she starts to say, but I pick her up before she can reach down and grab another damn brush. "Wait, I need my bag."

I look down at her, letting her know I'm not amused.

"Please, I really need it, and if you don't grab it, I'm just going to walk back down here to get it."

"Good to see you're finding your voice," I tell her, reaching down to grab the strap of her bag.

"I can walk," she informs me as I carry her out of the room.

"Yes, but you're not supposed to, are you?"

"Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me," I say, surprised to find that it's true. When Matvey had texted me to let me know that Katya had been painting for hours, standing on her sore feet, and had skipped supper, I'd immediately gotten in my car and come home. I may have been hiding out at work because I'm still not sure how to handle my new marriage, but that doesn't mean I want her not eating and hurting herself.

Carrying her into our room, I drop her bag by the bed and continue into the bathroom, putting her back on the counter, just like earlier. When I grab a foot and start to pull the sock off, she sighs and says, "How'd it go with my brothers? Make any big plans?"

When the sock is off, my mouth tightens in a line when I see that she's bled through her bandages.

“Goddammit, Katya,” I growl at her, setting her foot down so I can get the damn antibiotic cream and more bandages.

She gives me a wary look, but keeps her mouth shut. She’s managed to get a smudge of blue paint on the tip of her cute nose, and my urge to cup her face and memorize every inch of her with my lips and tongue is growing stronger by the second. It just adds to my irritated mood. Peeling off her bandages, I see the cuts she’s reopened because her stubborn ass couldn’t stay in bed for one damn day, and when a drop of blood slides down her skin, splattering into the sink, I raise a brow at her.

“The next time I tell you to stay in bed and rest, you better damn well do it.”

“I started to, but then Emily and the others came in. She saw my drawings and asked me about painting the nursery.” She shrugs her small shoulders. “I just got really excited, and then you never came back, and I knew I’d go crazy if I just sat up here waiting for you.”

When I dab on some medicine, she says, “Next time I’ll just crawl so my feet won’t get hurt.”

The image of her crawling in her pretty pink dress with her cotton, pink panties has a groan escaping before I can stop it.

“No crawling,” I say, refusing to elaborate on that rule by adding that I’m the only man she’s allowed to get on her hands and knees for.

She sighs and lets me doctor her feet. When I’m done, I leave the socks off because I think her feet are cute and grab a cloth, wetting it at the sink next to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Look in the mirror.”

She turns her head, groaning when she sees the paint splotches dotting her pretty face. “That’s about right,” she mutters.

She holds her hand out for the cloth, but I ignore her, choosing to do it myself instead. Hooking a finger under her chin, I tilt her face up to mine and run the warm cloth along her adorable button nose. I don’t know what in the hell has gotten into me. I can’t stop thinking about her, and whenever I’m around her, I keep noticing things that I’ve never noticed on a woman before. I hate to say I’ve always been the stereotypical man who only pays attention to tits and ass, but that pretty much sums me up before my little bride walked down the aisle and I lifted her veil and she started fucking with my mind.

The blue of her eyes is almost identical to the paint Roman used in the nursery, and why the hell am I even noticing that? I shouldn't like seeing her fingers stained with charcoal or watching her chew her bottom lip when she gets nervous. I shouldn't give a fuck about any of this because I'm not fucking keeping her.

My mind keeps screaming at me while I gently wash the rest of the paint from her face, and when I get to the splotch of yellow on her neck, my fingers drag along her delicate skin before I've even made the conscious decision to do so. Her skin is silky soft, and that intoxicating vanilla scent is driving me fucking crazy. Curling a strand of her long, dark blonde hair around my finger, I study the different shades of color before meeting her eyes. She's watching me, but the fear that was so obvious just this morning is no longer the first thing I see in them.

No, right now, with her lips slightly parted and pupils blown, there's nothing but hunger in them. Letting her hair slide off my finger, I grab onto the hips that have become permanently seared into my mind and scoot her so I'm standing between her legs. Her dress rides up dangerously high, giving me a mouthwatering view of her parted thighs as I dig my fingers into her curves and step closer.

"Vitaly," she whispers, and the slight tremor in her voice has my cock straining against my jeans.

Bringing one hand up, I drag my fingers along her cheek before threading them into her thick hair so I can cup the back of her head as I lean closer. Our lips are almost touching when I whisper, "You owe me a kiss, *ptichka*."

"I do?"

The heat of her breath hits my lips, and when I give her top lip a teasing, quick lick, she lets out a soft gasp and grips my shoulders for balance.

"You do. I only got the corner of your mouth at our wedding." My fingers lightly grip her hair, tilting her head further back. "I don't even know what my wife tastes like." I give her another lick, this one slower as I trace the line of her top lip. "It's fucking driving me crazy."

Without another word, I close the distance, pressing my lips to hers. I'm not sure if the moan I hear is coming from her or me, but the raw need in it is exactly what I'm feeling. Gripping her hip tighter, I pull her closer while I fist her hair with my other hand and part her lips with my tongue.

Goddamn, she tastes just as fucking sweet as I knew she would. Her hands go to my face, the touch hesitant at first, but soon she's moaning and gripping the back of my head, trying to get me closer. The shyness dissolves as her body's natural instincts take over, and I know I'm seconds away from losing complete control of this situation. When she hooks a leg around my waist and rocks her hips, I growl into her greedy mouth and let go of her hip so I can slide a hand between her legs. I wait for her to stop me, maybe some part of me is hoping she will, but an even bigger part of me is hoping like hell she won't. When she lets out a sexy whimper and widens her thighs for me, it's all the invitation I need.

Dragging a finger up her cotton panties, I groan when I feel how wet the fabric is.

"You're soaking wet," I growl into our kiss.

She lets out the sexiest goddamn whimper I've ever heard when I press the pad of my thumb against her clit and give her a firm rub. Konstantin had said she was completely innocent, and the way she seems surprised by her body's reaction has me believing him.

"Has anyone ever made you come?" I ask, because I want to hear her say it.

"No." The word comes out in a breathless rush when I give her another rub.

"Surely you've made yourself come, though, right?"

When I'm met with silence, I pull back just enough to see her beet-red face. She avoids my eyes, choosing to focus on my neck instead.

"Look at me, *ptichka*," I tell her, waiting until her blue eyes find mine. "Are you telling me you've never had an orgasm?"

"Does it really matter?" Her blush deepens, creeping down her neck and disappearing into her dress. I'm dying to know how far down it travels.

"It matters," I tell her, giving her another rub. "Tell me the truth. I don't ever want you to lie to me about anything."

"No," she finally whispers. "I've never had an orgasm."

"How the fuck is that even possible?"

"It just is," she huffs out, getting frustrated with my questions and the way I'm keeping her right on the edge of the pleasure she's never experienced, and I'm stunned by how badly I want to be the man to give it to her.

"Eyes on me, *ptichka*. Don't you dare look away."

When I'm confident she's not going to disobey, I drag my fingers up her panties before sliding my hand into them. When I'm cupping her bare, silky soft pussy, I'm the one who almost breaks eye contact when mine threaten to roll back into my goddamn head. She's soaked, beyond soaked, fucking dripping for me, and when I nestle one finger between her pussy lips, she gasps and widens her eyes but doesn't look away.

"Good girl," I tell her, noticing the way the words pull another soft moan from her parted lips. "So fucking innocent," I say, swiping the pad of my thumb over her swollen clit.

"Vitaly," she moans when I start to rub her in soft circles, feeling her pussy lips clench down on my finger, begging me to fully enter her, but I don't. I stay on the outside, not dipping into the tight wet heat of her like I'm so desperate to do. I'm not a selfish lover, but I'm not a *selfless* one either, but for the first time, I don't give a fuck about my own pleasure. I just want to watch her find hers. I want to see her come undone from my touch.

"I've got you," I tell her, speeding my thumb up, bringing her closer and closer to the edge. I can't take my eyes off her. She's transforming right before me, claiming a pleasure that's always been unknown to her, and it's beautiful to watch. The flush of her skin darkens even more, her pupils are completely blown, and her soft whimpers fill the damn bathroom. It's not over the top, though. She's not acting for me, not trying to put on a show that she thinks I want to see. It's just her—completely on display and vulnerable and sexy as hell.

"Ready, *ptichka*?" I ask, leaning closer so I can give her bottom lip a soft suck. "Are you ready to come for me?"

"Yes." The word is part gasp and part moan, and when I press harder against her clit, rubbing her in a way that I know she won't be able to resist, she moans my name and soaks my goddam hand as her hips rock against me and her whole body tenses with her release. I keep my eyes on hers, watching her through the whole damn thing, wanting to memorize every detail of the sight of her coming undone for the first time in her life, coming undone by my hand.

"That's right, baby," I growl, feeling her pussy tighten even more against my finger, her entire body begging me to slip inside. Unable to resist, I slowly slide one finger into her, groaning at how fucking tight she is. Her pussy clamps onto me, sucking me in deeper as she rocks her hips

and comes again. Feeling her inner walls spasm around my finger has me gritting my teeth to keep from pulling my dick out and sliding into her. I'm so hard it's fucking painful, but all I can think about is taking care of her. I don't want to scare her, and I don't want to push her too far. This isn't about me right now. It's all about her, and I want to see how many times my *ptichka* can scream for me.

"Vitaly," she gasps while I slowly finger-fuck her through her orgasm, giving her sensitive clit a small break.

"Something wrong, baby?" I ask when she starts to squirm.

"Too much," she pants, making me smile.

Ghosting my lips over hers, I whisper, "I think you can give me one more."

"Fuck," she moans when I lightly graze my thumb over her clit.

"Just one more," I tease, twirling my finger inside her as I pump in and out of her tight pussy. "Give me one more."

"I can't." Her fingers clutch at my shoulders as her body starts to shake.

"No? You don't think so?"

"No," she breathes out in a whisper.

"Let's see if I can prove you wrong."

Her eyes start to close when I rim her clit with my thumb, but I tighten my grip on her hair and give her top lip a soft bite.

"Eyes on me."

Usually I'd be actively avoiding eye contact, but I want to see her. Fuck, I can't take my goddamn eyes off her.

"Good girl," I praise when she opens her eyes for me. "I want to see you when I prove you wrong."

She looks like she's about to say something ridiculous like, *you'll never make me come again*, so I stop her words with a firmer rub.

"What was that?" I tease, bringing her closer to the edge that she's certain she won't be toppling over again. "Were you about to tell me that I couldn't make you come again?"

Giving a soft laugh at the whimper she gives, I thrust my finger in as deep as I can get as she clenches around me, fighting for the control she lost the second I cupped her sweet pussy.

"You're very wet, sweetheart," I groan. "Do you hear that? You hear how sloppy wet this cunt is for me?"

Her cheeks turn a flaming red as I finger her harder, filling the bathroom with the erotic sounds of her arousal.

“Don’t be embarrassed, *ptichka*. I fucking love it. Your body knows exactly what it wants. You can try and fight it, but you won’t win.”

“You sure are cocky,” she pants out, making me laugh. “Maybe I will win.”

I smile at the stubborn glint in her eyes.

Oh, baby, it’s fucking on.

Releasing her hair, I slowly drag my fingers down her neck, grazing them along her collarbone. The sweater dress has a cowl neck, making it easy for me to pull it down, exposing the practical, pink, cotton bra that matches her panties. I smile when I see it.

“I never thought I’d be a cotton underwear kind of guy,” I admit to her, “but I’m quickly becoming a fan.”

“It’s all I have,” she says in her own defense. “It’s not like I’ve been dressing up for anyone.”

The thought of her buying sexy lingerie for another man sends an unfamiliar spark of jealousy through me. It’s such a foreign fucking concept that it takes a second for me to register what it is that I’m feeling. I don’t get jealous. Jealousy implies emotions, and I don’t fucking have those with women.

Pushing the thought aside, I focus on the tits I’ve been dying to feel. She’s not enormous, but she’s a handful and it’s all natural. When I cup her in my hand, her hard nipple presses against my palm. She lets out another breathy moan when I run my thumb over the swell of her breast. Still fingering her pussy, I roughly pull her bra down and squeeze her nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

“Go on, *ptichka*, prove me wrong.” I pinch her nipple again and rub her clit. “Don’t come.”

She glares at me, irritated by my taunt and the fact that we both know she’s going to lose this battle.

“Uh-oh,” I whisper when I feel her body start to tense. “Someone’s getting close.”

She’s too far gone to answer. She just clutches at me and digs her fingernails into my shoulders, trying so damn hard to prove me wrong. She’s a fighter, and I fucking love that. She’s going to lose, but I love that she’s trying like hell not to.

“Your tight little pussy is sucking my finger in, baby. Do you wish it was my cock?”

A moan slips out before she can stop it.

“I’m not so sure you could handle me. You’re tight enough with just one finger.” I give her top lip another nibble. “You didn’t marry a small man.”

She narrows her eyes at me, but I just smile and pinch her nipple even harder. Rolling her clit under my thumb, I keep working her, forcing the orgasm onto her and smiling when I see the heated look in her eyes. The surprise and shock, the flash of anger, and then finally the grateful acceptance of all the pleasure I’m giving her—it’s fucking stunning to watch. And just because she pissed me off by insulting my skills, I give her another one right after the one she insisted she wasn’t going to have.

When her whole body is shaking and her eyes are glazed and she’s gasping for air, I take pity on her and slide my hand out of her panties. Bringing my soaked fingers to my mouth, I suck them clean while she watches me through hooded eyes. The taste of her hits my tongue, filling my mouth and guaranteeing I’ll never get it out of my head. I will remember my first taste of her for the rest of my goddamn life. It’s like it awakens something inside me that I hadn’t even known was asleep. All I want to do is kneel down in front of her and beg to eat her pussy.

Shaking my head to clear it, I rest my forehead against hers, trying to get control of myself. My cock is rock-fucking-hard, and I’m soaked in so much pre-cum I feel like a fucking teenager again. Letting go of her breast, I cup her face and give her one last kiss.

“Don’t ever bet against me when it has to do with you coming. You’ll lose every time, *ptichka*.”

She’s still too dazed to do anything but nod, and when I pick her up and carry her back to bed, she doesn’t even try to argue.

“Stay here,” I tell her. Pointing a finger at her, I add, “I mean it. Don’t fucking move.”

“Mm-hmm,” she says, snuggling back against the pillows.

“And don’t fall asleep. You need to eat.”

I get another half-hearted “Mm-hmm” before I turn and leave. Heading downstairs, I find Lev in the kitchen, grabbing a snack. I see the tray of cupcakes and smile.

“Did Emily make those?”

“She did,” Lev says, stuffing the last bite of one into his mouth.

I glance over at him. The island is between us, and I feel like I need to make sure, so I ask, “Jolene’s not hiding over there is she?”

Lev gives a soft laugh. “Unfortunately, no.” Then he laughs harder. “You think I’d be eating a cupcake while my wife gives me a blowjob?”

“I mean, it might be kind of nice. They’re each amazing and to have them both at once? I don’t know, man. It could be pure heaven.”

I grab one while he shakes his head, and as soon as I smell the sweet vanilla scent of it, my mind immediately goes to Katya. Fuck, I’ll never be able to smell anything sweet again without thinking of her.

“How’s it going?” Lev asks, nodding at the stairs in case I didn’t realize he was asking about my marriage.

“It’s fine. She doesn’t seem quite as terrified as she was when she first got here, and I think she might hate me a tad less than she did.”

“Oh yeah?” He lifts a pierced brow at me. “How did you manage that?”

I see the grin he’s making no effort to hide. “I didn’t fuck her,” I say.

He holds up his hand and laughs. “Of course not. You’re not going to do that, remember?”

“No, I’m not,” I say, feeling my resolve start to slip a bit.

“Mm-hmm,” he says, and I can hear the doubt in that little hum.

I point my half-eaten cupcake at him. “I’m not.”

“Of course. You will definitely not be making sweet, sweet love to that woman.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Jesus Christ, please don’t ever let me hear those words come out of your mouth again. Ever. Jolene’s made you soft, man.”

He smiles. “She has. Only for her, though.”

I eye the bruised knuckles on both his hands, knowing he’s right. There isn’t really anything soft about Lev. He doesn’t do near as many underground fights as he was doing, but he’ll still occasionally go to keep David happy and off our backs, especially now that Konstantin and Osip have taken an interest in placing bets. We can’t afford to make too many changes and draw unnecessary attention.

While I heat up the leftovers, Lev and I go over the meeting we’d had with Konstantin earlier. It’s getting harder and harder to be around that jackass, especially now that I’ve been around Katya. He may not have beat her, but he sure as fuck did something to her. She’s terrified of him, and I

want to know the reason for it. I'd nearly punched the fucker when he'd smiled and asked if his sister had done what was expected of her.

Grabbing two drinks from the fridge, I lean against the counter and cross my arms over my chest. "Once we find out where Alina's at, all hell is going to break loose."

"It is," he agrees, and I can tell by the way his brow is furrowed that he's worrying about Jolene.

"They'll be safe," I remind him. "All of them will be."

"And the wife you might be tossing back?"

"Fuck, man," I groan, scrubbing a hand over my face, disgusted at the thought of Katya being around her brothers again. "I won't let that happen."

"I know you won't throw her back to them, but you and I both know the safest place for her is right here."

"For now," I agree.

"Okay, answer me this," he says, because he's determined to not let this go. "Do you feel anything for her?"

I ignore him and grab the leftovers, dishing it out onto two plates. When I look up, he's giving me a smug grin. "Matvey was right."

"About?"

"He said you wouldn't be able to resist her."

I gesture to myself and smile. "Really? This is me resisting her." I don't add that my hand still smells like her pussy and that I can still taste her arousal on my tongue. Minor details that he doesn't need to know about.

"For now," he says, still grinning, because evidently my brothers have all become wise, married men now, more than happy to dispense unwanted wisdom at the drop of a hat.

"Take your fucking pearls of wisdom and shove them straight up your ass. I've got this under control."

He's still laughing when I take the plates and walk back upstairs. I hate it when he's right, and we both know he is. There's something between me and Katya, and I don't know what in the fuck to do about it. The plan was to annul this and never speak of it again. Move on and pretend it never happened, but when I walk into the bedroom and see her curled into a ball on the bed, fast asleep and looking so goddamn beautiful it makes my chest ache, the last thing I want to do is let her go.

Setting the plates down, I sit on the bed and watch her sleep. She's on her side, hands tucked up by her chin, knees pulled up so she's in the fetal

position, and I can't resist reaching out and brushing aside the hair that's fallen across her cheek.

"*Ptichka*," I whisper. "You need to eat something."

She lets out an annoyed grunt and burrows deeper into the pillow. In a moment of pure insanity, I lie down on the bed next to her, so we're facing one another. Dragging my finger down her cheek, I whisper, "What the hell are you doing to me, Katya?"

I keep watching her, memorizing every detail of her face. At some point I fall asleep, because the next thing I know it's morning and there's a warm, soft body cuddled up against mine. She must've found me in the middle of the night, because her head is on my shoulder, her leg hiked over mine, and her hand is resting on my chest. She's not the only one cuddling, though. My arm is draped over her in a very possessive grip that is not at all my style. I almost laugh out loud. None of this is my style. Yet here I am, sleeping all night with a woman for the first time in my life, and I haven't even fucked her. My life has taken a drastic turn.

Instead of feeling suffocated or like I need to get up and run out the door, I let my fingers slip into her hair before holding a thick strand up to the early morning light. When I pull it closer so I can smell the vanilla-scented shampoo, my cock reminds me that I still haven't gotten to come. I'm not used to denying myself like this, and I'm curious how long I can last. It'll either be my hand or Katya's pussy, though. I don't care if this marriage wasn't by choice or if my initial plan was to have it annulled, I made a promise to her when we exchanged rings, and I never go back on my word.

The thought that I can't fuck anyone else should have me losing my goddamn mind, but I'm too busy smelling my wife's hair to care. When she starts to stir, I tighten my grip on her and kiss the top of her head. Her whole body freezes when she wakes up enough to realize who she's snuggled up against.

I give a soft laugh and drop her hair so I can stretch my arms above my head. We'd both fallen asleep fully dressed, and when she braces a hand on my chest, using me for leverage as she sits up, I look down, admiring the bare leg that's still draped over me.

"I'm sorry," she quickly says, looking everywhere but at me. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Coming several times will do that to you."

She lets out an embarrassed groan and starts to move off me, but I grab her thigh, holding her in place.

“Why are you embarrassed?”

“Are you kidding me? I’m embarrassed because I’ve never done anything like that, and I’m embarrassed because I still don’t know what to make of you.” She gestures between the two of us. “This is really weird, Vitaly.”

“Tell me about it,” I say with a laugh.

“I’ve never even been on a date before.” She shakes her head and looks over her shoulder at me. “And now I’m married.”

I reach up and run my hand through the hair I can’t seem to get enough of. “You must’ve had guys hitting on you all the time. Why didn’t they ask you out?”

She gives a harsh laugh. “Because my brothers would’ve killed them. They didn’t want anyone to know I existed. I’ve been hidden away my entire life, and no one hit on me. No one was even allowed to acknowledge my existence. Konstantin made sure of that.”

“How’d he do that?” I ask, trying to get a better picture of the monster we’re going up against.

“Some low-level enforcer made the mistake of giving me a polite smile one day, so Konstantin made an example out of him.”

“He killed him?”

“No, he didn’t kill him, but the poor man will never be the same.” When she looks back at me, I can see the pain in her eyes and without even needing to think about it, I’m pulling her back down and into my arms.

“It wasn’t your fault.” I run my hands through her hair and hold her tightly with my other arm. She doesn’t cry, but I feel the shiver run through her body.

“It feels like it’s my fault. It feels like it’s all my fault.”

I hold her for a few more minutes, but then her stomach growls, reminding me that the supper she was supposed to eat is still sitting on my nightstand.

“Come on, you need to eat something, *ptichka*.”

She gets up and walks to the bathroom, stepping gingerly on her sore feet while I try and figure out how I’m going to handle all this. I’m attracted to her, and I desperately want to sink my cock into her, but I’m also worried about her. I don’t like how scared she gets when she’s talking about her

brothers, and I hate thinking about her growing up all alone with nothing but sadistic rapists watching over her.

When she peeks her head out of the bathroom a few minutes later, I'm still just as confused about how to handle this marriage.

“Can I shower with my feet like this?”

Fuck, now I'm going to be confused and hard. I'm starting to think that's just going to be my normal state of being from now on—just a guy walking around with raging hard-on and a very confused look on his face.

Fucking perfect.

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Chapter 7

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Katya

“P *tichka*, I swear to god if you fuck up those bandages again, I’m going to tie you to the damn bed.”

I watch Vitaly rise and walk towards the bathroom, looking every bit the dangerous Bratva boss that he is. I’m not scared of him like I was, though. I keep waiting for a flash of anger to hit those whiskey-brown eyes or some glimpse of the rage that he’s trying to hide from me, but I’m not seeing it. He gets mad, like he is now at the idea of me hurting myself further, but it’s a different kind of anger than what I’m used to. It’s not the kind that will end in me or someone else getting hurt.

“I didn’t ruin my bandages,” I tell him, taking a step back when he opens the bathroom door and comes in. “I just want to know if I can shower.”

“No, you can’t.”

“What am I supposed to do then?”

He nods at the huge clawfoot bathtub in the corner. “A bath with your feet sticking out.”

“I think you might be worrying too much.”

He lifts a dark brow at me. “You think so?”

“Yes.”

He steps closer, and all I can think about is how easily he made me come last night. I’ve never experienced anything like it, and I’m still reeling from it. It was my first orgasm, my first several actually, and it’s not because I don’t have urges like everybody else or because I’m some sort of angelic saint. I’ve just been very miserable for a very long time, and sex has never been portrayed as anything good to me. After the shit I’ve seen, I

decided long ago that I'd be better off without it. Vitaly's making me rethink that position.

Cupping my face, he keeps his eyes on mine. "You came very close to needing stitches on those ridiculously cute feet of yours, and you need to let them heal. So, no, you're not going to take a shower and stand in a bunch of water. You're going to take a bath with your feet hanging over the edge."

Without waiting for a response, he walks to the tub and starts to fill it, even taking the time to add in some of my bubble bath before backing away and grabbing his toothbrush. Resting his ass against the counter, he watches me while he brushes his teeth, looking way sexier than any man has a right to this damn early in the morning.

"How am I supposed to get in without getting my feet wet?"

He smirks around his toothbrush.

"Yeah, I don't think so," I quickly say, crossing my arms over my chest.

He spits in the sink and puts his toothbrush next to mine before turning back around. "I'll be a perfect gentleman."

"Like last night?"

He smiles even bigger at the memory while my face heats up. "I won't touch you in any sort of intimate way unless you want me to. Feel better?"

"Not really," I say, making him laugh.

When the tub is full, he turns off the water and motions for me to step closer. "Get naked, *ptichka*, or I'll do it for you."

I hesitate too long for his liking, and he reaches down and grabs the bottom of my sweater dress, pulling it up and off my head in seconds. I feel like an idiot standing before him in nothing but my pink, cotton panties and bra. I'm sure this man is used to expensive lacy lingerie and the model bodies that wear them.

And then there's me, his new wife, with hips and thighs that are probably way bigger than he likes or is used to. I can't meet his eyes, so I focus on the bubbles in the bath instead. I'd rather not see the disappointment written on his face.

His fingers run up my sides before sliding along my back and unhooking my bra in a seamless move that lets me know exactly how many times he's done this. No awkward fumbling for this guy. No, he knows exactly what he's doing. Last night was proof enough of that. When my bra falls to the floor, he lets out a soft groan before hooking his fingers under my panties and pulling them down my legs.

“Jesus Christ,” he growls, kneeling down just inches from my pussy. In one quick motion, he scoops me up and gently places me in the tub, making sure my feet are hanging off the end on either side. Swiping a hand through his hair, he leaves his thick, dark strands wet but doesn’t seem to notice or care. When I dare to meet his eyes, it’s not disgust or disappointment I see in them. He looks like a man who’s seconds away from hopping into this tub and burying himself inside me. Despite how that thought makes my heart speed up and my pussy ache with need, I still feel a shiver of fear at the thought of that giant dick sliding into me. Just because he’s been sweet to me doesn’t mean he’ll continue to be that way while he fucks. What if he likes it hard and rough? What if it’s too much and I can’t handle it? I remember how the women had looked after my brothers were done with them. The bruise I’d seen on the maid’s neck before I left was nothing compared to the other women I’ve seen—the ones who could barely walk with blood running down their inner thighs and eyes so vacant I feared they’d completely lost their grip on reality.

“So many fears,” he murmurs, cupping my cheek and running his wet thumb along my skin. “It’s just a bath, *ptichka*. I promise.”

I nod and grip the sides of the tub. The bubbles are thick enough to hide most of my body, but when he grabs the handheld nozzle and gently scoots me into more of a sitting position, my breasts rise above the water. His eyes run over me, but he makes no move to touch me beyond using the nozzle to wet my hair.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m washing your hair.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Did it occur to you that maybe I want to?”

“No, not for a second.”

His sexy mouth curls up in a smile. “Well, I do, so let me take care of you.”

Sitting on the edge of the tub, he lathers up my hair, his movements so gentle they border on being reverent.

“I love your hair,” he murmurs as he runs his hands through the long strands.

“You do?”

When I look over, he gives me a quick wink that makes my heart speed up.

“I do.”

I look away, not sure how to process everything this man makes me feel. While he washes and rinses my hair, I grip the edge of the tub, trying to get comfortable in this awkward position. When he’s satisfied all the soap is out, he hands me a cloth and the body wash.

“Are you okay for a few minutes while I shower?”

“What?”

He gives a soft laugh. “I need to shower, and I swore I’d be a gentleman.” He nods at the cloth I’m holding. “If I start washing your body, I’ll be proving myself a liar.”

Without waiting for me to find my voice, he stands and walks to the large shower in the corner, the one that I have a perfect view of.

“I won’t be long. Don’t try to get out without me.”

I wet the cloth and run it over my face while I try very hard to not stare at Vitaly as he starts to strip. Squeezing out some soap, I start on my arms, but my whole body stills when he tosses his shirt aside, revealing the most beautiful upper body I’ve ever seen. Tattoos mark his tanned skin, etched beautifully over all the hard muscle, and when he starts to undo his jeans, my breath catches in my throat. Pulling them off, he stands in his black boxer briefs while he starts the shower, and once it’s the right temperature, he strips naked like he doesn’t have a care in the world and steps under the water.

The glass has obviously been treated with anti-fog spray, because nothing obscures my view of him, and I can’t stop staring. He’s hard, and the size of him has me gripping the edge of the tub because that can’t be fucking normal. There’s no way in hell that every man is walking around sporting something that huge.

When I hear a soft laugh, I force my eyes off his thick cock to meet his very amused look. Feeling my face heat up even more, I grab the cloth and start scrubbing, anything to take my mind off Vitaly and how goddamn perfect every inch of him is.

He keeps his shower short, and I’m all scrubbed clean by the time I hear him turn the water off and step out. I keep stealing glances at him, watching as he rubs a towel over his head, drying his hair and then running it over his body before securing it around his trim waist. God, how many muscles can one man have?

I'm still mulling that one over when he steps closer and pulls the stopper so the tub starts to drain before grabbing another towel. He waits, watching the water dip lower and lower as my body is slowly revealed to him. When he leans over to get me, I can see how tightly clenched his jaw is and the dark look in his eyes. Putting the towel over me, he scoops me back up like I weigh nothing. I'm crushed against his hard, wet chest, and when I grab his shoulders for support, he lets out a deep, masculine groan that goes straight to my pussy.

"I can walk," I whisper.

His eyes meet mine, and I can see the soft smile playing at his lips. "This way is more fun."

I study his tattoos as he carries me out of the bathroom and into the large, walk-in closet, smiling when I see the colorful dragon that's peeking over the curve of his shoulder. I want to take my time, studying every tattoo, but he's already preparing to set me down. Before he does, I run a finger over the Russian words tattooed across his pec.

"Brothers in blood, in life, and in death," I say out loud, reading the phrase.

He looks down at me but doesn't say anything.

"You're very close to your brothers."

"I am," he says, choosing to not elaborate.

"That's really nice."

I envy him his family. I would give anything to have brothers that care about me, a family that I could love and have them love me in return. The idea is so foreign to me that it's hard for me to understand. I can't even begin to imagine how great that must feel. Even with my parents dying when I was ten, I don't have fond memories of them. My dad was distant and cold, and my mom was almost just as bad, choosing to hire someone to take care of me instead of doing it herself. I've always been passed off for others to deal with.

Vitaly surprises me by kissing my forehead, keeping his lips pressed against my skin far longer than necessary, like he's reluctant to let me go. Before he sets me down, he brings his nose to my hair, breathing in the scent of me.

"Get dressed, Katya. You need to eat."

I grip my towel, watching him drop his as he reaches out for a pair of boxer briefs. "I can feel you staring at me, *ptichka*."

"I'm sorry. I'm just not used to seeing a naked man right in front of me."

He looks over his shoulder, giving a soft laugh. "I'm glad to hear that. Now get dressed." His eyes slowly run over me, making me feel like I'm naked in front of him instead of still desperately clutching at my towel. "I'm only human, and I'm scraping the bottom of the damn barrel for willpower. I'm not so sure how much longer I can last."

Turning around, I grab a pair of panties and slip them on under my towel, ignoring the soft laugh he gives behind me. With my back still to him, I undo the towel and wrap it around my head to try and dry my hair a bit more as I slip on a bra and reach for a pair of jeans and a light blue sweater. When I'm dressed, I turn around to find Vitaly leaning against the wall and staring at me. He's in jeans and a black sweater that hugs his muscular body in a way that makes me want to fidget and rub my thighs together as this closet starts to feel way too fucking small. His face is unreadable. After a few seconds, he scrubs a hand over the light stubble he has since he didn't shave this morning and grabs another pair of thick socks for me.

Kneeling down, he grabs one of my calves and sets my foot on his thigh. Checking to make sure the bandages are still okay, he carefully puts one of the socks on me and then does the same to the other foot.

When he starts to pick me up again, I grip his shoulders and say, "Wait, I have to brush my hair."

"That can't wait?"

"No, it'll be a huge tangly mess if I don't do it while it's still wet."

He sighs and sets me on the bed before going to grab my brush. When he walks back out, instead of handing it to me, he motions for me to turn around and then pulls off the towel, letting my hair fall down my back.

"I can do it," I tell him, wincing when he puts the brush in my hair at the roots and tries to pull it down. "Ow. Have you ever done this before?"

He laughs. "No."

"I can tell."

He laughs harder. "Surely I can be taught, Katya. Tell me what to do."

I smile and look over my shoulder. "Start at the bottom and slowly work your way up."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, making me laugh.

His hands are gentle but confident as he sections out my hair and starts at the bottom, slowly working his way up. Goosebumps pepper my skin as his fingers graze my neck, combing through my hair like he's been doing it for years. When all the tangles are out, he doesn't stop. He keeps brushing, sending little shivers of pleasure through me at his touch. I had no idea it could be so erotic to have someone brush my hair, but everything Vitaly does feels sensual.

Finally, he tosses the brush on the bed and then picks me up again.

"Time to get breakfast."

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, letting him carry me downstairs because it's obvious he's taking my feet very seriously. The others have already finished eating and are off doing other things when he carries me into the kitchen and sets my ass in one of the barstools.

"My skills are limited in the kitchen, I'm afraid," he says, walking over to grab two mugs and the pot of coffee. "I can do tolerable scrambled eggs and bacon, a pretty decent bowl of cereal, or some frozen pancakes. I don't want to brag or anything, but I'm pretty damn good at microwaving them."

"Pancakes sound great. Thanks."

He smiles and hands me the milk and sugar before getting the frozen pancakes. I point to the sonogram on the fridge.

"Is that Roman and Emily's baby?"

"Yeah," Vitaly says, smiling even bigger. He points to something I can't see from where I'm sitting. "We're hoping this grows as he gets bigger."

"I'm sure it will," I say with a laugh. I don't add that maybe he'll get really lucky and be built like his uncle, but I'm definitely thinking it.

After a breakfast of surprisingly good microwaved blueberry pancakes and some bacon that Vitaly only slightly burnt, his brothers come walking in. Lev laughs and smacks Vitaly on the back.

"Guess what we're doing today?" he asks and then looks over and gives me a smile. "Morning, Katya."

"Morning," I tell him.

"How are your feet?" Danil asks, walking over to fill his mug with coffee.

"They're good. I think I'm perfectly fine to walk around on them," I say, cutting my eyes to Vitaly who doesn't miss a beat by saying, "You made them bleed yesterday, *ptichka*."

Lev raises a pierced brow at the nickname but doesn't comment on it. He does give a soft laugh, though.

"What are we doing today?" Vitaly asks, trying to get them back on track.

Lev reaches over and grabs the last piece of bacon off Vitaly's plate. "We're putting together a crib."

Vitaly laughs and nods at Roman. "You sure he can handle this. The painting nearly did him in."

"We're five reasonably intelligent men," Roman says. "How hard can it fucking be?"

"Reasonably intelligent?" Danil asks, trying to look offended. "Speak for yourself, brother."

Roman laughs. "Good, with your genius brain we should have this thing up in twenty minutes."

"Famous last words if I've ever heard any," Vitaly says, shaking his head.

"Where's it at?" Matvey asks.

"Already in the nursery," Roman tells him.

I give Vitaly's sweater a soft tug, and he immediately looks over at me, concern written all over his face.

"Do you think I can still paint while you put it together?"

He smiles and gives my hand a soft squeeze. "Of course. There's plenty of room, and with Danil's big head we'll have it done in no time."

"Big head?" Danil asks. "Roman said genius brain, not big head."

Vitaly smiles and shrugs. "Same thing."

"I'm pretty sure it's not at all the same thing," Danil tells him.

"Come on," Roman says. "I want to surprise Emily with this, so we need to get it done before she wakes up from her nap."

Vitaly checks his watch. "Damn, she's already taking her nap?"

"She couldn't get comfortable last night and slept like shit, so I'm making her lay around today." I can hear the concern in his voice, and yet again I'm reminded of the vast differences in our families. "She tried to argue with me about it, but she was asleep pretty much as soon as her head hit the pillow."

"Okay, let's do this," Vitaly says, standing and picking me up again, not letting me go until I'm in front of the mural I'd started yesterday. Leaning

down, he says, “Don’t hurt your feet again. Sit on the stepladder when you can, and I’m making you stop for lunch.”

His lips brush my forehead in a soft kiss before he stands and walks over to his brothers. They eye the large box like it’s a puzzle that needs figuring out. Twenty minutes, my ass. I have a feeling this is going to be an all-day event.

Grabbing my brushes, I pick up where I was forced to leave off last night and start working on the little bird in the tree. I bite my lip and try not to laugh when I hear the cussing start in Russian. Evidently, the crib is not quite as easy as they thought it would be.

“I don’t understand why we can’t figure this out,” Danil says after thirty minutes have gone by and the crib is still in pieces on the floor.

“Because this damn thing doesn’t make any sense,” Vitaly says, holding up the instructions and then flipping the diagram around to try and see if that works out better for him. It does not, so he hands it back to Roman with an annoyed grunt. “This is designed to make you fucking crazy.”

“How hard can this fucking be?” Lev asks, holding up one of the rails. “I mean, we’re basically building a box with no lid.”

After another forty minutes, Vitaly shrugs and says, “Your kid is sleeping on the floor. I’m sure he’ll love it. We can get him some nice comfy blankets.”

When I start laughing, he turns those amber eyes on me and lifts a brow. “Something funny, *ptichka*?”

“No,” I say, unable to hide my smile. “I’m sure it’s very complicated.”

“It is,” he says, and I swear it almost sounds a little bit like a pout.

“This is making me question everything,” Danil admits.

“Brain’s not feeling so big now, is it?” Vitaly asks with a laugh.

Matvey grabs the instructions. “We’re not being outdone by a goddamn crib. Okay,” he says, pointing at the diagram. “We need Part A. Which one is A?”

They all look around, finding the right piece before Matvey says, “And we attach it to Part B.”

When they locate both pieces, they hold them together while Lev asks, “Where the fuck are the screws?”

“I don’t know,” Matvey says, “but it also says we need dowels. What the fuck is a dowel? Do they have instructions in Russian?”

By the time they manage to build the damn thing, I'm laughing so hard I'm crying. I can't remember ever laughing this hard in my life. Being around this family makes it easy to forget that I'm supposed to be on my guard. Vitaly walks over, a smile playing at his full lips.

"I'm glad you found that so amusing."

"I did," I say, wiping away a tear. "I really did."

He laughs and turns back to Lev. "By the time we build one for your baby, we're going to be fucking pros."

"God, I hope so," he says. He looks around at his brothers. "We're all buying the same goddamn cribs. No way in hell are we learning how to build different ones."

It's painfully obvious that he's including Vitaly in this, and I'm too afraid to meet his eyes to see what he's thinking, so I busy myself with painting again. He watches me work for several minutes while his brothers move the crib to the center of the room so I can still easily paint the walls.

"Who taught you how to do all this?"

I finish the tail feather I'm working on before I look up at him. "I started when I was very young, and I just kind of taught myself. I watched a ton of videos online and spent thousands of hours drawing very, very badly. It took a long time, but I eventually got better."

"You're extremely talented." I blush at his praise, surprised by how happy it makes me that he likes my drawings. "I hope you'll add a couple of magpies," he says, giving me a quick wink.

I point at the only bare spot left on the tree. "They're going right there."

He smiles and then takes a step back to give me more room. I'm just getting started on them when Emily walks in the room and then squeals her husband's name before running into his arms.

"No running," he tells her, but there's no anger in his tone, just love. I watch the two of them, convinced that this isn't for show. They're not performing for me, trying to get me to believe something that isn't true. They genuinely love one another. I've never seen either one of my brothers act this way around anyone. They couldn't even put on an act to fake it, because there's no hiding their dead stare. Roman's eyes soften every time he looks at his wife, though.

"I can't believe you put this together," she tells him, smiling up at him like he's her whole world.

He smiles and kisses the tip of her nose. “Piece of cake, *solnishka*. It didn’t take us long at all.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Vitaly mutters in Russian with a laugh.

“I love it,” Emily says, running her hands over the beautiful, white crib. She looks up at the men standing around her. “Thanks for helping.”

“It’s not like we’d allow our nephew to sleep on the floor,” Vitaly says, giving her a big, innocent smile.

“You son of a bitch,” Lev says with a laugh.

Emily looks over at Vitaly. “You wanted our son to sleep on the floor, didn’t you?”

Vitaly laughs. I can see the easy relationship they have. It’s the kind of relationship I always wished for between me and my own brothers.

“That crib was crazy hard, Emily, like insanely crazy fucking hard. You need to keep having babies so that it’s always in use, because I don’t think there’s any way to tear it down unless you get a sledgehammer.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Roman says, splaying his hand across her belly and leaning down to kiss her.

“You should probably wait for this one to come out before you start trying to make another,” Vitaly says.

“Fucker,” Roman says with a laugh.

I go back to painting the magpies as Emily walks over and surprises me by wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, and I can’t believe our baby’s going to be able to look at it every day.” She smiles up at me. “It’s perfect. Thank you so much for doing it.”

“I’m happy to do it,” I tell her, feeling fidgety from the praise and attention. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it,” she says, giving me another squeeze before walking back over to her husband. “Okay, I’m hungry again,” she tells him, making him laugh.

They all leave to go grab lunch, but I’m determined to finish my magpies. I ignore the look I know Vitaly is giving me. I can feel him staring at me. My body’s quickly become attuned to him, and I swear I could feel him walk into a room even if I was blindfolded. When he stands behind me and runs his hand through my hair, I bite back the moan I want to give.

“You need to eat lunch.”

“You’re way too obsessed with my calorie count.”

He gives a soft laugh while dragging his thumb along the nape of my neck, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine and straight between my legs.

“You want to finish this first?” he asks, nodding towards my birds.

“Yes, I really do.”

“Okay. You keep painting, and I’ll make you some lunch.”

“I’m surprised you guys don’t have a cook.”

“Hey, you seemed to really like my pancakes this morning.” His thumb is still stroking my skin, and I smile at the teasing tone of his voice.

“I did. You’re one hell of a microwaver.”

“I try.” He smiles and says, “We’re thinking about getting a cook. We have someone come a couple times a week to help clean up, but we haven’t hired anyone to cook yet. We don’t like a lot of people knowing where we live.” His thumb dips lower, grazing the crook of my neck. “Have you always had a cook?”

“Yeah, and maids. My brothers would never clean up after themselves or cook.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised to hear that. Konstantin doesn’t seem like the type of guy to make a bed or crack an egg.”

“No,” I say, letting out a harsh laugh. “He is not.”

I get the feeling he wants to ask me more about my brother, but he doesn’t. Instead he gives my skin one last caress before stepping back.

“I’ll go make lunch, but when I’m done, you’re stopping to eat. You’re not skipping another meal, *ptichka*.”

I smile while I paint, enjoying the feeling of someone caring enough about me to fix me lunch. I’m almost done with the second bird when Vitaly comes back in to get me. I give him a quick glance and then shake my head.

“I’m almost done.”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest and leans against the doorframe. “That wasn’t the deal.”

Holding the handle of the smaller paintbrush between my lips, I use the other slightly larger one to fill in one of the wings. “Just one more sec,” I mumble around the brush.

“Katya,” he warns, pushing off from the door and stalking towards me.

My hands work faster, determined to finish this little guy, but when he grabs my wrist, I shoot him an angry look that has him smiling.

“A deal’s a deal.”

I grab the brush out of my mouth with my free hand and huff out an angry breath. “I’m almost done.”

“Lunch is done now.”

Without any warning, I bring the paintbrush up and swipe the soft bristles over the tip of his nose, painting it blue. His eyes widen in surprise, but all I can do is laugh.

“Oh, you’re going to regret that, *ptichka*,” he says, gripping both my wrists and hauling me back against the bare wall to our right, pinning them above my head with one of his hands. For one horrifying moment I think he’s pissed, like really pissed, and when he sees the flash of fear in my eyes, his face softens as he leans down so we’re face to face.

“You don’t ever need to fear me. I will never hurt you.”

I feel the heat of his breath against my lips, and when he tilts his head, leaning closer as he slowly drags his nose along my cheek, marking my own skin with the paint, I let out a soft moan and struggle against the grip he has on my wrists.

“You’re safe with me,” he whispers against my skin.

I let out a soft whimper when he brings his lips back to mine. The kiss is slow but demanding. He parts my lips with his tongue, sliding in like he already owns my mouth, and maybe he does, because the way my pussy clenches and soaks my panties makes it clear that my body is no longer obeying me. He’s the one in charge, and every single part of me knows it. Deepening the kiss, he presses his body against mine, pinning me to the wall as his tongue delves deeper. The scarred palm tightens around my wrists, pulling another moan from me that he quickly swallows. His other hand grips my hip like he’s never planning on letting go, and when I feel the hard length of him press against my stomach, I’m not sure if I want to run in fear or open my legs and welcome him in. My thighs part, making my decision for me right before he lets out a feral-sounding growl and pulls back, leaving us both gasping and wanting more.

“Goddamn,” he groans, running a hand over his face and spreading the paint even more.

“Interesting.”

We both turn at the sound of Lev’s voice. He’s leaning against the doorway just like Vitaly had been, a big smile on his face that accentuates the lip ring in the corner.

He gives a soft laugh and gestures to his face, circling his finger around. “You two have got a little something,” he pauses and laughs again, “everywhere.”

Before I can even try and wipe my face clean, he’s pulled his phone out and snapped a picture, then he smiles at Vitaly again and says, “Payback.”

“For what?” Vitaly asks, trying to look pissed but just laughing as he tries to wipe the paint off his face.

“For so many fucking things,” Lev says, laughing as he walks away. Before he disappears down the hall, he calls over his shoulder, “I’ve already posted the photo to our group chat, by the way.”

“Such an ass,” Vitaly mutters, running his finger over my cheek. “I’ve tried to tell him the metal from his piercings are fucking with his brain, but he won’t listen. I think they make him irritable.”

“He seemed pretty happy to me,” I say, not buying for one second that Vitaly’s actually upset. He’s too busy trying not to laugh to be mad at his brother.

“That’s Jolene’s doing. He was a real grump before he met her.”

“How’d they meet?”

“Lev’s an underground fighter, and Jolene is the sister of one of the guys he used to fight.”

“He doesn’t fight him anymore?” Before he can answer, I say, “I mean, I guess it would be weird for him to fight his brother-in-law.”

Vitaly laughs. “No, he doesn’t fight him anymore because Lev killed him. He was a real ass and he hurt Jolene. Lev wasn’t about to let that slide, so he challenged him to a fight to the death.” Vitaly raises an eyebrow at me. “Your brothers made a ton of money off that fight. I’m surprised they didn’t tell you about it.”

“My brothers never tell me anything about their work. The night you came over for supper when he told you about our wedding, I was locked upstairs in my room. He wouldn’t even let me come down to see who I’d be marrying. Everything my brothers do serves a purpose, and that purpose is always to help them in some way.”

“That almost sounds like a warning,” he says, watching me.

“It’s just the truth.”

Deciding to not push me for more information, he leads me out into the kitchen so I can get some lunch. I try not to get my hopes up. I try not to depend on the view of Vitaly that’s forming in my head, the one where he’s

sweet and kind and funny, because I know better than this. I'm not an idiot. I know the men who inhabit this world, and they aren't good, they aren't nice, and they sure as fuck don't treat their women this goddamn nice. Despite all the ways I try to talk sense into myself, I find myself falling quickly for the gorgeous Russian with the whiskey-brown eyes that make my heart speed up every time I look at him.

I almost start to believe the fantasy, but then reality sets in when later that night he tells me that he needs to go check on a few things at the club. I'm not thrilled about it, but it's not like I can tell him he can't go into work. When I fall asleep trying to wait up for him and then wake up to an empty bed, I start to worry. When I go into the bathroom and find his toothbrush wet and water droplets still on the shower tiles, I start to get pissed. He avoids me for three goddamn days. His brothers try and make excuses for him, but I can tell they're lying. He just doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to be around me. I spend every waking moment working on the nursery walls, but by the end of the third day, I'm on my last nerve.

Fuck this.

Taking one last look at the wall that I've just finished, I grab my supplies and head up to the bedroom that now feels like just mine. It's late and everyone else has already gone to their rooms for the night. I have other plans, though. After a quick shower, I slip into a pink dress and grab a cream, form-fitting sweater to go with it since it's gotten pretty damn cold outside. Ignoring how sore my feet still are, I slip into a pair of heels that make my legs look longer and slimmer. I keep my hair down like Vitaly seems to like and do my makeup a little heavier than I normally would. If I'm going to head into Pink, I at least need to look the part.

When I study myself in the mirror, I turn around and groan when I see the panty lines. Most of these dresses I just wore around the house by myself, so I sure as hell didn't care about panty lines showing, but I can't go out like this, and I don't have anything else to change into, so after a few seconds of debating, I slip my panties off and toss them on the bathroom counter.

Problem solved.

Being careful to not make any noise, I creep down the stairs, hoping like hell no one decides to get a late-night snack in the next five minutes. I saw Vitaly use a keycard when he first brought me here, but I've been watching, and you don't need a keycard to use the elevator from up here. Holding my

breath, I push the button, cringing at the dinging noise it makes when the doors slide open. I hop on and push the button repeatedly, trying to get the doors to close as fast as possible. I don't let out the breath I've been holding until the doors shut and I feel the elevator start to descend.

I try not to get too excited. I still have a long way to go, but when I reach the parking garage and no one is waiting for me, I hightail my ass across the cement, ignoring the sharp stabs of pain in my feet as I race for the sidewalk out front. Raising my hand, I hail the first cab I see and slip inside.

"Take me to Pink, please."

If the driver seems surprised that I'm asking him to take me to a strip club, he doesn't let on. He just nods and eases back into the late-night traffic. I relax against the seat as much as I can, but my nerves are frayed and my fingers are shaking. I don't know what I'm going to do once I find Vitaly, and it only just now occurs to me that I might be walking into something that I very much do not want to see. He's surrounded by beautiful, half-naked women every second he's at this club, and we haven't been having sex. He doesn't love me, and there's no reason to believe that he's being faithful to me. Hell, in this world, it's expected that he won't be. It's expected that he'll have tons of women on the side, but the very thought of him being with another woman makes me feel like I can't breathe. I'm just about to tell the cab driver to turn around, that I've changed my damn mind and I'd rather not know, but he's pulling into the parking lot, and it's too late to turn back.

Time to find out what my husband's been up to.

Chapter 8

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Vitaly

I 'm still gripping my phone tightly after reading Matvey's text.

Your girl left. She got in a cab, but I'm following her.

I jerk my suit jacket off and roll up the sleeves of my white shirt before unbuttoning the top buttons so I can get some fucking air into my lungs. Several minutes later when I still feel like I can't breathe, he sends a new text, one I wasn't expecting.

We're outside. She just walked past Boris.

Sure enough, less than a minute later, I get a text from one of our bouncers out front.

Boss, your wife just walked in.

As if I couldn't get any more pissed off, I turn the corner and see my wife in the middle of a goddamn strip club wearing a pink dress that hugs all of her mouthwatering curves. The tiny sweater she's wearing isn't doing shit to hide anything. I study her for a few seconds from the shadows, nearly breaking a damn molar when I realize she's not wearing any panties.

Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell is she thinking?

I see Matvey come in through the front doors, scanning the crowd for Katya. When he sees her, his shoulders relax and then he looks around until he sees me. Giving me a nod, he pulls out his phone and sends me another text.

You need me to stay?

No, brother. I got this. Thanks.

She's lucky I was in the gym and saw her sneak by. She just hailed a fucking cab in the middle of the goddamn night.

Don't worry. It won't happen again.

I see him shake his head, just as pissed as I am that she put herself in danger like this. Putting his phone away, he gives me a quick wave before leaving to go back home. Matvey has no desire to hang out in a strip club, and I'm not surprised to see him making a quick exit.

Staying in the shadows, I lean against the wall and watch Katya, curious to see what she'll do. She looks so fucking innocent standing in the middle of my club. Mostly naked women surround her, but none of them can even come close to comparing to her. I don't even notice them. I'm too busy watching her tuck a strand of loose hair behind her ear as she looks around and blushes.

When she walks to the bar, Mila gives me a quick look, waiting until I give a nod before she leans closer to take Katya's order. My sweet wife is oblivious to everything as she orders a drink, tapping her fingers nervously against the bar as Mila makes it. Taking the money Katya hands her so it doesn't look suspicious, she hands the drink over and then walks off to help another customer.

A group of three women saunter over to the bar next to her, looking like they're well on their way to drunk. The redhead on the end can barely keep herself upright, and when they start talking, probably way too loudly, I see Katya's back stiffen. She grips her glass tighter as her cheeks flush even darker, and after a couple more minutes, she climbs off the barstool, flashing way more leg than I'd like, and starts walking around the club.

I never let her out of my sight, staying behind her as I keep to the dark corners, and when I see a man walk over to her, everything grows deadly calm inside me. He's eyeing Katya like he wants to do everything to her that I want to do, and god does it piss me the fuck off. When he smiles and takes a step closer, saying who the hell knows what kind of shit pick-up line, Katya takes a step back, making it clear she's not interested. Not even seeing her dismissal of him can lessen my rage. It's two seconds away from consuming me, and as soon as I see him reach out and grab her wrist, it's like he lit the damn fuse, because I fucking explode.

Storming over to them, I breach the distance in seconds, and the fucker has just enough time to look up and see me before my fist is connecting with his nose, shattering it with a satisfying crunch that immediately has blood pouring down his face. Katya lets out a squeal as I step closer and grab the man's shirt, keeping him upright when it's obvious his knees are seconds away from giving out.

“You think you can touch her?”

“I’m sorry,” he sputters, spraying blood everywhere as he coughs.

The look of pure terror in his shit-brown eyes appeases me enough to not pull my gun out and shoot the bastard, but just barely. Several bouncers come rushing over as the crowd scurries away to avoid getting hit if this turns into a fight. I let go of the man who quickly brings his hands to his nose in a sad attempt at stopping the flow of blood. Wrapping an arm around a terrified-looking Katya, I pull her body against mine and point my finger at the man.

“This is my wife, and if you ever lay your hands on her again, I will fucking kill you. Understood?”

He quickly shakes his head, not even daring to glance at Katya when he mumbles another apology. I look over at the bouncer and nod.

“Get him the fuck out of here.”

“Yes, sir,” he quickly says and then grabs the man, hauling his ass out as he leaves a trail of blood behind him.

“Vitaly,” Katya starts to say, but I hold up a finger to cut her off. Keeping my arm securely around her, I lead her across the club and down a hallway. Opening my office door, I walk in with her, slamming the door shut behind me.

I see her mouth open, and I raise a brow at her. “Do you have any idea how much danger you put yourself in by sneaking out on your own?” I rake a hand through my hair, so pissed I can barely think. “A fucking cab, *ptichka*? You just ran out and hailed a fucking cab? What if someone had seen you or recognized you or realized that you were my wife and decided to use it against me? And your feet?” I gesture at the heels she’s wearing. “Jesus Christ!”

“How do you know I took a cab, and would you really care if something happened to me?”

“Matvey followed you, and what the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you haven’t been home in three nights, and you’ve been spending all your time here.” She waves her hands out, indicating the strip club we’re in. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what you’ve been out here doing, or who you’ve been doing, I should say.”

Her blue eyes turn glassy as she gives a harsh laugh. “I heard all about your reputation at the bar. Tell me, Vitaly, is there anyone in this city you

haven't fucked?" She lets out another laugh that almost turns into a sob. "I mean, besides me."

I scrub a hand over my face, remembering the drunk women who'd been talking next to her at the bar.

"I don't know why I let myself believe that you might be different. I'm such an idiot." She starts to cry, and it breaks my fucking heart.

"*Ptichka*," I say, closing the distance and cupping her face. "Look at me, baby."

"Don't call me that," she pouts, and I can't help but smile at seeing her feisty side.

"Please look at me."

I wait until her blue eyes are on mine. "I don't know what those women said, but I need you to know something. I haven't so much as looked at another woman since the night I found out we were going to be married. I've never cheated on you."

Leaning closer, I kiss her trembling lips and whisper, "I *will* never cheat on you. Loyalty is everything to me, and I gave you mine when we exchanged vows. I will never go back on that."

"You haven't slept with anyone else?" she whispers.

"No, baby, I haven't."

She clutches at my arms, digging her fingers into my bicep. "Then why didn't you come home? Why are you avoiding me?"

"Because I'm an idiot," I say, deciding to be honest. "I came into work that first night because I had some stuff I needed to take care of and because there's a lot of shit that my brothers and I are dealing with. I stayed because I'm falling so fucking hard for you, and that wasn't the plan."

"What was the plan?"

Her voice is soft and shaky, and she looks so fucking vulnerable. She brings out all my protective instincts, the ones I thought for sure I'd never have for a woman, but I'd been wrong. I'd been so fucking wrong because I'd do anything to keep this woman safe, to keep *my wife* safe.

I run my fingers along her cheek, brushing aside the tears that have started to fall. "The plan was to not fall in love with you, and to annul the marriage as soon as I was able to."

She flinches like I've smacked her, and the hurt on her face is more painful than anything I've ever experienced.

“But you ruined the plan, *ptichka*, because I went and did the one thing that I swore I was never going to do.”

“What’s that?”

I drag my thumb along her bottom lip. “I fell in love.”

Another tear slips out, and this time I lean closer and run my tongue up her cheek, coating my tongue with the salty taste. It’s enough to make me lose control. With a groan, I fist her hair and bring my mouth to hers, kissing her like I’ll never be able to get enough. All the fear and worry I’d felt when I got that damn text message and all the rage I’d felt when I saw another man’s hand on her go into the kiss, and when she whimpers and drags her nails over my scalp, I cup her ass and lift her up, sitting her on the edge of my desk.

“Promise me you’ll never leave without telling me again,” I growl against her swollen lips.

“I promise,” she says, her breaths ragged and chest heaving.

“I can’t believe you came to a strip club and didn’t wear any fucking panties.”

She pulls back in surprise. “How can you possibly know that?”

“I just do.” Forcing myself to take a step back, I run my eyes over her perfect, flushed body. “Show me,” I growl. When she hesitates, I raise a brow at her. “Spread those beautiful thighs, baby, and show me what fucking belongs to me.”

She lets out a sexy moan before she obeys me by parting her thighs. Her dress slides up, but not as high as I want it to. When I meet her eyes again, she knows exactly what I want. Grabbing her dress, she hikes it up even more, revealing her perfect pussy to me.

“Goddamn,” I groan, eyeing her shaved cunt and soaking wet slit. She’s glistening and smooth and the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. My cock strains painfully against my suit pants, and I know what I’m about to do is going to test me more than anything else in the world ever has, but I don’t care. I fall to my knees before her, because nothing is going to stop me from eating my wife’s pussy. I need to taste her. I need to feel her against my lips as she comes.

Running my hands up her thighs, she moans as her eyes go heavy-lidded. Leaning closer, I keep my eyes on hers as I slowly kiss my way up one of her inner thighs. Letting go of her dress with one hand, she brings it

to my head, running her fingers through my hair while I trail a line of kisses along her soft skin.

As I get closer to her center, my heart speeds up and pre-cum soaks my dick. Digging my fingers harder into her thighs, I spread her wide enough to make her pussy lips part for me.

“So fucking beautiful,” I growl, my eyes locked on her pink inner lips that are now exposed to me. Everything about her is so goddamn sweet and innocent, and I can’t wait to tear into her and make her mine. I want this little cunt bloody from my thick cock. I want the proof of her innocence written all over my dick.

Nuzzling my nose against her slit, I breathe her in as she lets out another whimper.

“Who am I?” I nip at one of her smooth lips before kissing away the sting.

“What?”

She’s dazed and having a hard time paying attention. I run my tongue up her slit, filling my mouth with the taste of her.

“Who am I?”

“Vitaly,” she says, and I almost laugh.

“Try again, *wife*. Who am I?”

She lets out another moan when I give her clit a flick of my tongue.

“My husband,” she moans.

“Good girl,” I praise, parting her lips with my tongue and dipping inside. “I want to hear you say it again.”

“You’re my husband.”

“Who gets to touch you?”

“You,” she quickly says and then moans again when I give her clit a soft suck. “Only you.”

“This is mine,” I growl, running my tongue from the bottom of her slit to her clit. “Every fucking part of you is *mine*.”

“Yes, only yours.” Her words come out in a breathy rush, and when I keep licking and sucking on her delicate folds, she moans my name and falls back onto my desk, giving me better access to the pussy that belongs only to me. No one else will ever know what she tastes like.

This is *mine*.

She is mine, and I’m done fighting it.

When she starts to come, she screams my name and bucks her hips against my eager mouth, greedy for the pleasure that only I can give her. Her release hits my tongue, pulling a growl from me as my cock screams at me for release. Helpless to resist, I roughly pull my zipper down and fist my cock, working myself in a brutal rhythm with only one goal in mind, because if I don't fucking come, I'm going to lose my goddamn mind.

But first, I'm taking her with me. Latching onto her clit, I suck her hard while I keep pumping my cock, fighting my orgasm until I hear her sweet whimpers and feel her body tense beneath mine. With a ragged cry, she screams my name and shatters once more, falling apart at my touch.

As soon as I feel her body soften, I stand and bring my mouth to hers, kissing her as the orgasm thunders through me and I come all over her sweet pussy. My cock pulses in my hand, the orgasm fucking blinding me as she whimpers and sucks on my tongue while her arms and legs wrap around me, pulling me closer. I cup the back of her head, protecting it from the hard wood of the desk, and when I'm finally empty, I wrap my arms around her, needing her as close as I can get her.

The sensation of wanting to hold her, of wanting to be close to her and smell her vanilla scent and feel her heart racing against my chest is so fucking foreign but also so fucking perfect. It's comforting, and I hadn't been expecting that. I thought I would feel trapped or like I was suffocating, but instead I feel free for the first time in my life, like I've only been using half my lungs and I'm just now getting a full breath. I kiss a line across her cheek and drag my nose along the shell of her ear, breathing her in and knowing I'll never be able to get enough.

"Fuck, *ptichka*," I whisper. "You've broken me, sweetheart. I've fucking shattered at your feet, and nothing will ever be the same for me again."

She holds me tighter, burying her face in my neck. She seems so small and vulnerable, and I know there's nothing I won't do to protect her. She just became my entire fucking world, and there's no going back for me. I need to tell her the truth, I need to tell her so many damn things, but first I need to talk to my brothers. It involves all of us, and they have a right to know that things have changed between me and Katya. If she's going to be a part of our family, a real and permanent part of it, then she has to know the truth about what we're doing with her brothers.

Picking her up, I hold her against my chest and sit down in my chair, keeping her in my lap.

“I’m scared,” she admits, keeping her face buried against me so I can feel the heat of her breath on my skin.

I cup her head, burying my fingers in her hair. “Of?”

“Everything. You confuse me, Vitaly. You’re not at all how I thought you’d be. You’re not at all like any man I’ve ever known or been around. I don’t understand. You’re so sweet, but you’re involved with my brothers. You traffic women. It doesn’t make sense.” She bolts upright like she’s just thought of something and turns to face me. “Do you have a pet?”

“No, I never have.”

That really confuses her. Her brow scrunches up and she shakes her head softly. “I don’t understand.”

I run the back of one finger down her cheek. “I promise I’ll explain everything soon. I just need you to trust me for a little bit longer, and then I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

It has not escaped my notice that she didn’t tell me she loves me back, but I can tell by her face that all of this is a lot for her to process. She doesn’t fully trust me yet, but that’s okay. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving to her over and over again that I can be worthy of her love. I’m not the man she thinks I am, but my *ptichka* will learn that I’m nothing like her brothers.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I’m trusting you, Vitaly, but I swear if you lie to me, I’ll never trust you again.”

I cup her face and pull her closer, kissing the tip of her cute, upturned nose. “I will never lie to you, Katya.”

She relaxes against me, and when I run my hand up her thigh, she looks down and her lips part in a gasp when she sees my newest tattoo. I’d gotten it three days ago, right after I left the penthouse. Showing the tattoo artist the photo on my phone, he’d recreated Katya’s magpie on the last blank spot I had on my inner forearm, like I’d been saving that last bare piece of skin just for her. I’d also had him add her name into the white patch of feathers along its wing.

“Is that mine?” The surprise in her voice makes me smile as she drags a finger lightly over the tattoo.

“It is. I saw it the night of our wedding after you’d fallen asleep, and I liked it so much that I took a picture of it.”

“And then you chose to have it permanently drawn onto you?”

I smile and give a soft laugh. “I did. I wanted one of my wife’s beautiful drawings on my skin.”

“It turned out really beautiful.” Her finger grazes the iridescent feathers.

“The tattoo artist was very impressed by the photo I showed him, and I couldn’t stop smiling when I told him my wife drew it.” I give a soft laugh. “It might’ve ruined my tough guy image at that particular shop.”

When she lets go of my arm, I slide my hand further up her thigh, groaning when I hit her bare, wet skin. I drag the pad of my thumb over the cum I left on her body before pushing it inside her. As soon as her pussy lips part and I shove my cum where it’s never fucking been before, I realize how far gone I am. If I’m with a woman, the only thing my seed touches is the inside of a condom, end of fucking story, but here I am willingly pushing it inside her because I can’t stand the idea of it being anywhere else.

“We’re walking out of this club together, and we’re going to do it with my cum all over and inside your pussy and my tongue still tasting of you, because you’re mine, baby, and every fucker in this place is going to know it.”

I give her a kiss, smiling when she lets out a soft moan and clenches around my thumb.

“Besides, I want to show you this place.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” she quickly says.

“Despite what those drunk assholes said at the bar, I’ve never fucked a single person who works for me.”

“You haven’t?”

“No, *ptichka*, I haven’t.”

Sliding my thumb out of her, I bring it to her lips, groaning when she wraps her lips around me and sucks me clean.

“And after I show you around, I’m going to make you eat something because I know you’ve been skipping meals, and then I’m going to take you home.” I give her a wink. “If you’re a good girl, you might get lucky.”

She laughs around my thumb, giving me one last suck before slowly pulling back. “I might, huh?”

“If you play your cards right, you might be able to convince me, yes.”

Her face lights up in another smile, and all I can do is stare at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, pulling her closer for another kiss. This one is slower and sweeter, and the only thing that gets me to stop is knowing that I don’t want to take my wife’s virginity in a fucking strip club. She deserves better than that.

“Come on, baby.” I carefully lift her up and then help her fix her dress before tucking myself back away and fixing my suit. “Are your feet okay or do you need me to carry you?”

She laughs like I’m joking, but when it’s obvious I’m not, she smiles and shakes her head.

“No, they’re okay.”

Smiling, I grab her hand. “Let me show you my club.”

She seems less than thrilled about walking around Pink, but I want to show her the place in the hopes that it might make her feel better if she sees the professional side of things. Before we leave my office, I put my suit jacket on her just like I had at our wedding.

“Seriously?” She looks up at me with a raised brow. “You do realize there are women out there who are basically butt-ass naked, right?”

I shrug. “I don’t give a fuck about them, and they’re not my wife.” When she looks like she’s about to argue, I hook a finger under her chin. “The last guy that touched you ended up with a broken nose. If anyone else touches you, I’m killing them.”

Seeing how serious I am, she nods and says, “Okay, the jacket stays on.”

“Thank you.”

She smiles and wraps an arm around my waist when I pull her closer. We walk out of my office together, and as soon as we hit the main area, her body stiffens next to mine. The place is packed like usual, and there are women at every pole and on every stage. It’s tits, ass, and barely covered pussy as far as the eye can see, but none of it does a damn thing for me, and I want her to know that.

Leaning closer so she can hear me over the sultry beat, I say, “You’re the only woman who gets me hard, *ptichka*.” I motion at the club around us. “When I first took control of this place, it was an absolute dump, the kind of place that you couldn’t have paid me to walk barefoot in. I had to pretty much gut the place and start over from scratch.”

I point above us to the VIP section that circles around the entire club. “I made the VIP section an area that actually feels like it’s set apart, and I had

a kitchen built onto the place and hired one of the best chefs in the city. I also made sure the dressing rooms had private areas for each of the dancers and several hot tubs to soak their sore muscles. The men who work security are in our Bratva, and they know that none of the women are to be touched unless they allow it. No one's getting assaulted at my club."

She looks at everything I'm pointing out and nods her head. "I bet you make a ton of money here."

"It's pure profit at this point."

She eyes a man getting a lap dance less than ten feet away and then turns her blue eyes back to mine. "I'm not so sure I'll ever feel comfortable here," she admits, "but I can appreciate what you've done with the place. You've made it a huge success. That's pretty amazing, and I may hate strip clubs, but I can admit that this one doesn't feel sleazy like I thought it would."

I smile at her praise. I've worked my ass off making this club a success, and even though it's not her thing, it means the fucking world to me that she's keeping an open mind and seeing all the hard work I've put into this place.

"Come on," I say, squeezing her hand and pulling her toward the bar. "I want you to meet someone."

As soon as Mila sees us, she smiles and leans against the bar.

"Mila, I want to introduce you to Katya, my wife."

I kiss Katya's head and say, "Mila is married to Timofey, one of our top men."

Katya smiles and shakes Mila's hand. "Nice to meet you."

Mila laughs and shakes her head at me. "Nice to meet you, too." She gives another soft laugh. "My husband was at your wedding, and I swear if he hadn't taken a photo, I never would've believed it." She points a finger at me while looking at Katya. "This guy always swore he'd never get married."

Katya laughs. "I'm pretty sure he didn't want to marry me."

Mila shakes her head. "It might have been forced on you at first, but look at this guy." They both turn to stare at me. "I never thought I'd see Vitaly in love."

I give her my biggest smile and shrug. "You can take a picture if you want."

She laughs and takes me up on it, pulling her phone from her back pocket. Before she can snap a photo, I pull Katya in closer so we can both smile at the camera. Mila laughs and puts her phone away.

“Can you tell Maurice to get us two meals to go?” I ask her while she pours me a shot of vodka that I didn’t ask for but she knows I’ll drink.

“Sure.” She gives Katya another smile. “Really good to meet you.”

“She’s very nice,” Katya says when Mila walks off to take another drink order and to call Maurice in the back so he can get started on our steaks.

“She is,” I agree. “This place wouldn’t run nearly as smoothly without her.”

I let out an annoyed groan when I hear a feminine voice call my name. Turning my head, I see the group of women who’d been filling Katya’s head with rumors and tales of my past. Keeping her pressed tightly against me, I down my shot and then turn to face them. The three women were on their way to being drunk last time I saw them, and it looks like they’ve managed to arrive at their destination. The redhead giggles, barely keeping herself upright while the two blondes use each other for support. They look vaguely familiar, probably regulars at the club.

“Vitaly,” one of the blondes squeals, giving me a sloppy, lopsided smile. “Remember me?”

“No, I don’t.”

The redhead laughs and nudges the blonde’s shoulder, or tries to anyway. She almost manages to knock her own ass onto the floor, but she rights herself at the last second, looking just as surprised by it as I am.

“I told you he wouldn’t recognize you,” she tells her friend. “You’re probably lying anyway.”

“I am not,” the blonde hisses before turning her bloodshot eyes up to me. “Tell her you fucked me.”

“Did I?”

The redhead snorts out another laugh while the other blonde whispers a “Harsh” under her breath. Katya watches them, but she doesn’t pull away from me.

“We did,” the blonde that I evidently fucked at some point whines at me. If she was a little more sober, I’m guessing she’d be stomping a foot at me. “Outside the nightclub on Cooper Street.”

“Doesn’t ring any bells,” I tell her. I honestly have no memory of her. I’ve fucked a lot of women, and none of them ever meant a damn thing to

me. I look down at Katya, hating that she has to come face to face with this part of my past.

When it's obvious the women aren't going to walk away, I say, "If you'll excuse us, my wife and I are leaving now."

"Your wife?" the blonde hisses, making her first mistake by talking about my wife with that fucking tone of voice. Her second mistake is raising a finger and pointing it at Katya as she yells, "He's been cheating on you this whole time, bitch."

Stepping between them, I glare down at the drunk woman who's officially pissed me the fuck off. "I don't remember fucking you, but I haven't been to that nightclub in months, definitely not since I've been married."

I look back at Katya and then pull her against me again, kissing her forehead before looking back at the other women.

"I love this woman, and I would never cheat on her, and I would never forget a single detail about anything that has to do with her." This time I'm the one pointing my finger when I look back at the three drunk idiots in front of me. "Don't you ever fucking insult my wife again."

"Oh yeah? Or what?" Her brown eyes scrunch in pure drunken fury, but her two friends are smart enough to take a step back, distancing themselves from the one with a target on her fucking head.

I step closer and smile, but there's no humor in it. "I'll fucking kill you," I tell her, letting her see that I mean every goddamn word I'm saying.

She finally realizes how much trouble her drunk mouth is getting her ass into as her face pales and she steps back to join her friends.

"Get the fuck out of my club." Without bothering to watch them stumble to the main entrance, I shoot a quick text to Boris, letting him know the three drunk women headed his way are permanently banned from Pink.

"You didn't have to do that," Katya says, resting her hand on my arm.

"I'm sorry you had to see them and that she was such a bitch to you." I scrub a hand over my jaw and shake my head. I tell her the only thing I can when I meet her blue eyes. "My past is not my future, *ptichka*. I'm not the same man I was before I met you."

She grabs the front of my shirt, pulling me down to her level. "The future's the only part that matters to me, Vitaly." Closing the distance, she kisses me hard. It's a fierce kiss, and I smile when I realize she's publicly

claiming me just as much as I've been claiming her by walking around with her on my arm. We belong to one another, and soon everyone will know.

When she pulls back, I smile at her and give a soft laugh. "God, you've thrown my world upside down, baby." She smiles when I tap the tip of her nose. "But we're not buying a goddamn minivan."

She laughs and shakes her head, not having the faintest idea what I'm talking about. We grab the steak dinners from Mila on our way out and then make the drive back to the penthouse. Everyone else is already in bed, so we decide to eat upstairs. I'm surprised by how much I enjoy being around her. She makes me laugh, and she makes me want to know every single detail of her life before we met. I plan on finding everything out, but not tonight. I have other plans for us right now.

When she's finished her meal, I set the plates aside and pull her towards me, laughing when she wiggles her brows and asks, "Am I about to get lucky?"

"God, I love how much you make me laugh."

She smiles and then lets out another laugh when I grab her hips and position her on top of me. With her straddling me, her dress rides up dangerously high, making it easy for me to lift it just a bit more so she's flashing me pussy.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." My thumb lightly grazes her silky soft skin while I remember exactly how goddamn good she tastes.

She blushes at my praise and starts to unbutton my shirt. Her hands are shaky, and I love how innocent she is. I love that she's never done this before, and I love that I'm the only one who will ever see her like this. I'm starting to understand my brothers a lot more. I had no idea monogamy could be so fucking sexy.

When my shirt is unbuttoned, she opens it and stares down at me. Her curious fingers run over my tattoos like she's memorizing every single inch of me. Nails graze my abs, sending another rush of blood straight to my cock, and when she hears me groan, the corner of her mouth lifts up as she gives me a wide-eyed look, like she's surprised by my reaction. This woman hasn't the faintest fucking idea what she does to me.

I reach up and brush a finger along one of her flushed cheeks. "Why do you look so damn surprised?" Grabbing her hips, I grind her gently against

my hard cock. “Do you see what you do to me? You drive me fucking crazy, *ptichka*.”

She moans at the feel of her bare pussy rubbing against my suit pants and the rock-fucking-hard cock that’s straining against the fabric.

“It’s just hard for me to believe.” Her voice is raspy as her breathing picks up.

“Why?”

“We just spent an hour at your strip club, Vitaly, the strip club that’s filled with the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen.”

“No one’s more beautiful than you,” I say, meaning every damn word of it. When I start to pull her dress up, she tenses, and it breaks the heart I swore I didn’t have. “Don’t hide yourself from me. I want to see you. I want to see my wife.”

She relaxes and lets me pull her dress off, and when she’s in nothing but her pink, cotton bra, I smile and quickly unhook it, tossing it aside. I growl at the sight of her—the hips that I always want to sink my fingers into, the pussy that’s so fucking perfect and just for me, the tits that make my goddamn mouth water. As much as I love her body, it’s the hunger in her pretty blue eyes and the sweet smile playing at her lips that does me in.

Fucking pussy whipped is what I am, and I’m loving every second of it.

“What are you smiling about?”

I laugh and run my hands up her body, filling my hands with her tits. “How in the hell could I not be smiling right now? My beautiful wife is naked and on top of me, and I was just thinking about how completely whipped you have me.”

“And that makes you smile?”

“Fuck yeah it does, baby. I love that you own my ass.”

She laughs and shakes her head like I’m crazy. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“I never thought I’d say it, but it’s the truth. My brothers are going to give me such hell for falling in love.”

Leaning down, she presses her lips against my chest, slowly kissing a line along my skin. I thread my fingers in her thick hair, groaning at her vanilla scent and the feel of her lips.

“I think we’ve waited long enough to consummate this marriage, husband.”

“I couldn’t agree more, wife.”

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Chapter 9

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Katya

Vitaly always gets the sweetest look in his eyes when he calls me his wife, and it makes my heart ache when I see it. I keep waiting for things to change, for the bottom to drop out and the real Vitaly to come forward, the one that's cruel just like my brothers, but I'm starting to truly believe that *this* is the real Vitaly, the one who holds me like I'm something precious, the one who protects me from vile men like my brothers.

I'm falling hard for him, and there's no stopping it. I just hope like hell I'm right about him. I don't think I'll survive giving my heart to Vitaly and having him break it. I run my fingers back down his chest, marveling at how damn perfect every inch of him is. He lifts up so I can take his shirt off the rest of the way, and when I see the magpie tattoo, my heart melts for him, for this man who's turned out to be so much more than what I thought he'd be.

When his shirt is off, he lays back down and gives me a sexy grin when I start to undo his pants. I've thought of little else since I saw him showering the other morning, and when I unzip his pants and lift up so he can wiggle free of them, I'm stunned to see he's just as big as I remember. I'd almost convinced myself that my imagination was playing tricks on me, that I'd added on a few inches of length and magnified the thick girth as just wishful thinking, but, no, if anything, he's bigger and my imagination didn't do him justice.

"You're huge."

He laughs, making me realize I've spoken the words aloud. Unable to resist, I run my hands up his muscular thighs before hesitantly reaching out

to run a finger over the set of balls that any man would be proud to possess. He hisses out a breath at my touch, and I smile as I do it again. I want to learn everything about this man. I want to know what he likes, what drives him crazy, and what makes his whiskey-brown eyes turn dark with lust. He may have a long track record with women that I really wish he didn't, but no one will know him like I do. I'm going to make him mine and only mine.

When I bring my fingers higher, lightly dancing them along his shaft, he groans and says, "You're driving me crazy, *ptichka*."

"This is my first time," I tell him. "I don't want to miss a single detail of this."

"We can do it more than once."

I smile at his carefree laugh. "You have a beautiful smile."

He reaches up and runs his thumb along my bottom lip. "So do you, baby."

Lowering my head, I bite him gently before sucking him in. I watch his eyes darken, and when he grips my hip, moving me so my pussy is flush with his cock, we both groan at how fucking good it feels.

Pulling my head back so his thumb leaves my mouth, I look down and whisper, "You're going to break me in two."

He cups my face and gives me the sweetest smile. "Never, baby. We're going to take this slow." Using the hand that's still locked on my hip, he starts to slowly move me, grinding my pussy along his shaft. "First you're going to use me and make yourself come. You're going to soak my cock, baby, and I'm going to love every second of it."

Before nerves can get the better of me, he digs his fingers in even harder and raises a brow at me, looking ridiculously sexy lying on the bed with all his muscles and tattoos on full display.

"Don't get shy on me now, wife. I don't want anything between us. I want to see you at your most vulnerable, just like you're going to see me. I want to know everything about you," he says, echoing what I'd just been thinking. "I want to know what makes my wife scream."

"I have a feeling as soon as you shove this giant thing inside me, I'll be screaming."

He smiles and rocks his hips, sending a spark of pleasure all through me. "That's not the kind of screaming I want from you." Rocking his hips

again, he slides his thumb back between my lips. “Suck my thumb and rock those beautiful hips for me, baby. Let me see you come undone.”

I wrap my lips around him, sucking him in as I start to rock my hips before pulling back so I can say, “You know I don’t know what I’m doing, so there’s no point in pretending I’m going to be like the girls you hire at the club.”

“You’re fucking amazing,” he says, “and there is no comparison. I love that you’ve never done anything like this before. I love that I’m the first man to ever see you like this, and I especially love that I’m the only man who will ever see you like this.” His fingers dig in harder. “This part of you is mine, baby, only mine.”

“Yes,” I whimper when he grinds me harder against him. I suck his thumb, rocking my hips and letting my body take over. All my insecurities melt away when I see the heated look he’s giving me.

“My sexy wife,” he groans, moving his hips to meet my movements so we’re working together in perfect harmony. “Come on my cock, baby. Be a good girl and give me what I want.”

I can already feel how close I am, and when I look down and see his thick cock beneath me, soaked in my arousal as his abs tense with his movements, the sight is enough to push me over the edge. When I come, I suck his thumb harder.

“Eyes on me,” he growls when I get embarrassed and start to look away. “Every part of you is mine, *ptichka*. Don’t ever try to hide from me.”

When I keep my eyes on his as the orgasm thunders through me, he gives me a sexy smile that sends another rush of pleasure through me. “Good fucking girl. Your pleasure is *mine*, wife. I’m the only one who gives it to you, and I’m the only one who gets to see it.”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan, running my tongue over his thumb.

As soon as I start to come down, he slips his thumb out from between my lips and grabs my hips, flipping me onto my back. In one quick motion, he’s hovering above me, his powerful body stretched out along mine. The hunger in his eyes combined with the thick, long erection pressing against my pussy has me almost trying to scurry away.

“No, baby,” he whispers, leaning closer so his lips can graze mine. “No fear, sweetheart. I will never hurt you.”

“I think we both know this is going to hurt.”

He smiles and nips at my bottom lip, that one movement reminding me that my body needs more. Even though I just came hard, I want another, and it's that desire that's going to outweigh my fear. Proving my theory correct, he slowly slides his length along my pussy, hitting my clit the whole way and pulling a sound from me that I didn't even know I was capable of making.

"You know what I think, *ptichka*?" He murmurs against my lips. "I think you're going to be begging for my cock. I think you're going to love how it fills you so fucking full." His tongue runs along the seam of my lips, gently parting them. "The pain will be nothing compared to the pleasure I'm going to give you."

When I feel the head of his cock press against my soaking wet slit, he sucks my top lip, putting just enough pressure so he's slightly parting my pussy, but not hard enough for him to sink inside.

"Are you ready, *ptichka*?"

His voice is strained, accent much thicker than usual, and it's sexy as hell. I don't even have to think about it when I nod my head and whisper, "Yes."

"I've never not used a condom, baby, but I'm not about to use one with my wife. I want to feel you around me. Nothing is going to separate us, and when I come, you're going to take it all like a good fucking girl." He nips my bottom lip again. "I'm going to fill you so fucking full, baby. I want you dripping my seed all goddamn night."

With that image firmly in place, he starts to slide into me. I start to tense, but he parts my lips with his tongue and kisses me so damn sweetly. When I flinch at the sharp sting of pain, he cups my cheek, caressing my skin as his tongue runs over mine.

"I've got you," he whispers against my lips. "And I'm never fucking letting you go." He slides in a bit more as I dig my fingers into his back and hiss out a breath. "This is mine, baby. This perfect virgin pussy is all fucking mine and no other man will ever have it."

I nod, but it's not enough for him. He slides in another inch. "Say it, *ptichka*."

"I'm yours," I moan, knowing exactly what he wants to hear. I had no idea it would mean so much to Vitaly to have me, but I love that it does. I never thought in a million years that he would treat me with such reverence,

but it's like he's worshiping my body when he slowly slides in a bit more, groaning at the feel of my wet heat enveloping him so damn tightly.

"Fucking perfect," he growls against my lips. "See how good you spread for me, baby?"

His thumb caresses my skin as he buries himself inside me, filling me to the point of pain.

"Fuck," he groans as I cling to him, gasping for air. The pain is more than I thought it would be, but it feels so fucking good, too. I didn't think there was any way in hell he'd actually fit, and I'm still not sure how he's accomplished the miraculous feat, but I very much feel like I'm about to be split in two.

"Look at me, *ptichka*," he whispers against my lips. When I meet his eyes, he smiles and lightly runs his fingers along my cheek. "Mine, baby, all fucking mine."

"Yes," I whisper back, and when a tear slips out from the pain, his eyes soften as he brushes it away.

"I love you, Katya," and when I start to open my mouth, he taps my lips with his finger. "Don't say anything. I know you're scared of trusting me, and I don't want you to feel like you have to say it back. I just want you to let me show you how hard I've fallen for you. I want you to let me love you."

He kisses me gently and slowly rocks his hips, sending a rush of pleasure and pain through me that's beyond anything I could've ever imagined.

"Just let me love you," he murmurs against my lips again, and then he slowly starts to fuck me, changing my world completely and utterly. I assumed that Vitaly would fuck like I imagine most men fucking—a fast, brutal sort of fuck that's impersonal and all about them getting off, but that's not at all how Vitaly is. Every touch is reverent and sweet, and he's so goddamn careful to not hurt me more than necessary. I couldn't be just anyone lying beneath him, some nameless, faceless woman who's just serving a purpose. The way he's looking at me, the way he's caressing my face and kissing me—all of it makes it clear that he's seeing me, and it feels like the first time in my life that anyone has actually done that. He doesn't just see me as my brothers' sister or as part of the Lebedev family. The way he's looking at me makes it clear that he's looking at his wife, the woman

he loves and the woman he'd do anything to protect. Seeing that look in his eyes nearly sends me over the edge.

Seeing my reaction, he circles his hips, somehow managing to hit some hidden spot deep inside me that sends my body spiraling out of control.

"Vitaly," I gasp, knowing I'm seconds away from what's promising to be the best orgasm of my life.

"Come for me, wife, fucking shatter for me."

He gives me another thrust, circling his hips and hitting me right where I need him to. I scream his name and clutch him even tighter against me, not wanting any separation between us. He kisses me through it, and every thrust keeps the orgasm going until I'm completely consumed by it, until I'm completely consumed by *him*.

"That's my good girl," he growls against my lips. "Soak my fucking cock, baby, and make it yours."

He gives me another hard thrust, sending aftershocks through every part of my body.

"This pussy is *mine*, just like my cock is yours and only yours."

"Yes," I pant, digging my nails into his back as he kisses a line to my ear. "Only mine, Vitaly. No other woman will ever have you again."

"What other women, *ptichka*?" The heat of his breath against my ear sends a shiver down my spine. "There's only you, Katya. There will only ever be you."

He gives my earlobe a soft suck, letting his teeth drag along my skin as he slides a hand down and cups one of my breasts.

"God, I love your body," he groans, pinching my nipple as his hips speed up and he starts to kiss a path down my neck. "How am I ever going to stop fucking you?"

I'd answer if I could and beg him to never stop, but he wraps his mouth around my nipple and gives me a hard suck, stealing the words from my mouth and replacing them with a moan. His tongue runs over me, and when I feel him give me a soft bite, my hips buck up to meet his as he lets out a low, deep laugh.

Giving me one last suck, he sits up and grabs onto my hips. Looking down at my body, his eyes rake over me, taking in every detail, and when his eyes trail lower, he lets out the sexiest groan I've ever heard.

"Fucking hell," he growls, watching his thick cock slide in and out of me. "Your innocence is painted all over my dick, *ptichka*, and it's the

sexiest goddamn thing I've ever seen."

He brings his thumb to my clit and gives me a firm rub. "I want one more," he says when I whimper at his touch. "Give me one more."

Pressing harder, he rubs my clit in slow circles as he fucks me in a deliberate rhythm that's designed to drive me fucking insane. Every stroke is slow and measured, ensuring that he's hitting every damn nerve ending I have while his thumb continues rubbing me. Right as I start to come, he speeds up, fucking me harder, taking control and guiding me through the orgasm.

"Another," he growls, and all I can do is groan. It's obvious I'm no longer in charge of my body. It's his to do with as he pleases, and right now he's determined to make me nearly pass out from pleasure.

When the orgasm starts to fade, he pinches my clit gently, rolling it between his fingers so that I have no choice but to come again. He feels me clench around him and with a deep groan he slams into me and brings his lips to mine, kissing me like he'll never be able to get enough as he empties inside me. Each pulse of his cock sends another rush of pleasure through me, and the moment is so fucking intimate and beautiful that my eyes start to water.

His body stills when he feels the tears on my cheek. Without a word, he kisses and licks them away and then kisses me again. When he pulls back, he rests his forehead against mine and cups my face.

"I love you so fucking much, Katya Melnikov."

My heart speeds up at his words, and I fucking melt for my husband. "I love you, too," I whisper, knowing I mean every damn word of it. I know it's fast, and I know there's still so much I don't know about this man, but I know enough, and as terrifying as it is to trust someone with my heart, I know he's worth the risk. I trust him, and I've never trusted anyone before in my life.

He gives me the sweetest smile and rolls us over so he's still buried inside me as I rest my head on his shoulder. His hands dance along my back and ass while he kisses my head and tells me in Russian that he'll never let anyone hurt me ever again, and I believe him. For the first time in my life, I no longer fear the future. I'm excited for it.

"What about my brothers?" I whisper, voicing the one thing that's still capable of scaring me. When I think about Konstantin and Osip now,

though, I don't feel the same terror that I used to. I know in my heart that Vitaly will protect me from them.

"What about them, baby?"

"I don't know how things are going to be. You'll be working very closely with them, and they're not like you and your brothers. They're evil, and they do horrible things to people. You met Oksana. You saw how she is. The only way she's survived their marriage is by turning to drugs." I breathe in his comforting scent and force myself to calm down. "They want me to spy on you and your brothers. I'm supposed to tell them anything that I see that's suspicious."

He sighs and strokes my head. "Thank you for telling me, but please don't worry about them. I promise you that they will never hurt you. You will never be alone with them again. Hell, you never have to see them again if you don't want. You're my wife, Katya, and I will never let anyone hurt you."

Nuzzling my face in closer to his neck, I smile at his words and close my eyes. "Thank you," I whisper against his skin, giving him a kiss before the exhaustion hits me and pulls me under.

When I wake, it's to an empty bed and a very sore pussy. Looking around, I don't see him anywhere, so I use the bathroom and throw on some clothes before leaving the room in search of him. Before I've made it downstairs, I can hear his brothers arguing in Russian.

"We can't trust her yet."

I stop where I'm at, recognizing the gravelly voice as Matvey's.

"We can trust her," Vitaly says, and I can't help but smile at hearing my husband defend me.

"You're meeting her brothers for lunch today?" Lev asks.

"Yeah," Vitaly says. "They texted this morning and said they want us to come over for lunch. I'm sure it's just to check up on things and to try and get information about us out of Katya. She told me they want her to spy on us."

"Then let's not give her anything that could hurt Alina," Matvey practically growls.

I don't know who Alina is, and I don't want to get caught spying since that will only make me look like I'm working with my brothers, so I start walking, making no attempt to be quiet about it. As soon as they hear me, they stop talking.

“*Ptichka*,” Vitaly says, quickly coming over to meet me at the bottom of the stairs. He cups my face and gives me a sweet kiss. “I’m sorry you woke up alone, baby. I was going to surprise you with breakfast.”

I hug him back. I’m completely addicted to the feel of this man’s arms around me. Nothing feels better than being wrapped in a Vitaly hug. When I look over at his brothers, they’re all standing and staring at us.

“Wow,” Lev says with a soft laugh.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t just seen it with my own eyes,” Danil says.

Roman smiles. “When Mila was kind enough to send us the photo she took of you two, I thought maybe it was just a fluke, a moment captured that wasn’t quite what it seems, but no, she was spot-fucking-on.”

“I heard you talking,” I admit, because I’d like things out in the open between us. “I’m not going to tell my brothers anything. I don’t know what your family is involved in, but I know you’re nothing like Konstantin and Osip. I don’t like what my brothers do, and I want no part in it.”

“But you don’t know what we’re up to,” Matvey says. “What if you find out something that could hurt them? Your loyalty wouldn’t lie with your family?”

I wrap an arm around Vitaly’s waist and step in closer. “My husband is my family.”

When I lift my head, the look on his face makes me smile. He’s fucking beaming at me, and I’ve never seen anyone look so damn proud. He leans down to kiss my forehead.

Looking back up at his brothers, he says, “Katya’s my wife, and she’s a part of this family now. We need to trust her and tell her everything.”

His brothers don’t say anything for several seconds before Matvey finally breaks the silence.

“If Katya’s a part of our family now, then she’s a part of our family only.” His dark eyes meet mine. “I’m not trying to be an ass. I have my reasons for being cautious. If you want to know everything, then you have a choice to make.”

“What choice?” I ask.

“You can be a Melnikov or you can be a Lebedev, but you can’t be both. Vitaly just told us that your brothers want to have lunch with the two of you, so go to the lunch and then come back here and let us know your decision.”

When I start to say something, he just raises a hand and says, “Don’t answer yet. You need to really think about it, because once you decide to be one of us, you won’t ever see your brothers again. It’s too risky. You can’t be in contact with them at all, which means you hand over your phone and you cut all ties. If they get suspicious, you can have a very supervised phone call with them to put them at ease, but no more visits and no phone contact without supervision.”

He looks over at Vitaly, “I’m sorry, brother, but that’s the only way this can work. I will happily welcome her into our family as a sister if she hasn’t changed her mind by the time you get back.”

“I understand,” I quickly say, not wanting Vitaly to think I’m upset. “Matvey’s right, and I have no problem cutting ties with my brothers. I’ve known for a very long time what kind of men they are, and I don’t ever want to be around it again.”

I meet Matvey’s eyes again. “I know you said to wait, but I can tell you my decision right now. I choose Vitaly.” I look up at my husband. “Always. It’ll be the same answer I give when we get back this afternoon.”

Matvey nods. “I look forward to hearing it, Katya.”

“Okay, sounds good then,” Lev says, clapping his hands together one time and giving a soft laugh.

“Check out the fridge,” Roman says, smacking Vitaly on the back.

“I’ve seen your kid’s small penis.” Vitaly looks down at me and lifts a brow in mock horror. “A teeny tiny nub.”

Roman looks at me and rolls his eyes. “Your husband is a giant dick.”

“A burden your son will apparently never have.”

“Fucker,” Roman laughs. “It’s a sonogram photo. Everything about him is teeny tiny.” Roman looks back down at me. “It’s the other photo I’m talking about.”

Vitaly leads me to the kitchen, and we both laugh when we see the photo that Mila had taken of us. Someone has blown it up and printed it out, hanging it front and center on the fridge. They’d even drawn a red heart around our faces and written *Vitaly loves Katya*.

Vitaly laughs and shakes his head. “They’re never going to let me live down falling in love with you.”

“I hope you think it was worth it.”

He looks down at me and smiles. “Absolutely worth it, *ptichka*.” Leaning closer, he kisses me gently and whispers, “How are you feeling

today?”

“Sore.”

He smiles even bigger before giving my bottom lip a soft suck. “Good. I want you to think of me with every step you take today.”

I shift my weight and wince. “Yeah, that won’t be a problem.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

I laugh. “I might actually believe that if you weren’t still grinning so damn big.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m a little bit happy that you’re sore, but it’s just because it reminds me that it was your first time and that I’m the lucky bastard who got to share it with you.”

Reaching down, he gently cups my pussy, pulling a moan from me that has nothing to do with how sore I am.

“I’ll make it up to you later, baby, I promise, but first you need to eat.”

Vitaly manages to cook me a big breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon and only burns the toast a little bit. After we eat, I show him the nursery, but he just picks me up and kisses me.

“Baby, I’ve been in here every night to see what you’ve done. I may have been hiding at the club, but I came back every night to check on you. I walked around in here to see what new things you’d painted, stunned by your talent every damn time, and then I’d go upstairs and watch you sleep. You like to kick your covers off, so I wanted to make sure you were warm enough.” He gives a soft shrug. “And then I couldn’t bring myself to leave. I’d usually stay and watch you until the sun came up.”

“You did?”

“I did.” He gives me another soft kiss. “I’m sorry I ran. I promise you it won’t ever happen again, but I need you to know that I was watching over you the whole time.”

“Thanks for telling me. We were getting along so well, and then you just left, so I thought you’d changed your mind about me.”

“Never, baby. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

I smile and bring my lips to his. “That sounds perfect to me.”

He carries me upstairs and insists on checking my feet again before getting into the shower with me. Knowing I’m too sore for sex, he washes me slowly and then uses his fingers to make me come, whispering in my ear all the things he plans to do to me later. By the time we get out of the shower, I feel drunk on lust and more than a little unsteady on my feet.

Laughing, he wraps a towel around me and carries me to the closet.
“Okay, baby, let’s get this damn lunch over with.”

I start looking through my clothes, more than ready to be done with my old family so I can embrace my new one. While he dresses in a suit, I grab a simple black dress and matching heels.

“Goddamn.”

I turn around to see him staring at me with a hungry look in his gorgeous eyes. His eyes run over me, the slow perusal making me squirm before he’s even halfway up my body. The corner of his mouth lifts up in a sexy smirk, and by the time his eyes reach mine, I’m more than ready to just go back to bed. He steps closer, lightly grazing his fingers along my hips before he kneels in front of me.

“I think you started something last night, *ptichka*.” His hands run under my dress and up my thighs before hooking his fingers under the sides of my panties. “I like knowing you aren’t wearing anything under your dresses.”

He gives me a wink and slowly pulls my panties down. Once they hit my ankles, I use his shoulders for balance and step out of them. Instead of standing back up, he groans and buries his head under my dress.

“Fuck,” I gasp, when he immediately plunges his tongue inside me. “Vitaly,” I moan, still sensitive from the orgasms he just gave me in the shower.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he growls against my pussy. “I need you to give me one more.”

“I’m starting to think that’s your life’s motto.”

He laughs and the heat of it against my sensitive folds sends a shiver of pure bliss through me.

“I want you to come on my face. If I have to endure lunch with your brothers, I’m going to do it with the smell of their sister’s pussy on my face.”

He gives my clit a soft suck, pulling another moan from me.

“It’s the only thing that’s going to keep me sane.”

His tongue gently parts my sensitive folds as he gives me a slow lick.

“Now be a good girl and give me what I want or we’re going to be late.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond. His tongue slides into me, fucking me in a rhythm that leaves me speechless and clutching at his shoulders for balance. Knowing we need to leave any minute, he doesn’t waste time, he slides his tongue out and latches onto my clit. He knows

exactly what I like, and it's not long at all before my thighs are shaking and I'm whimpering and desperate to come like it's been days instead of minutes. He's turning me into a goddamn sex addict is what he's doing, and I'm helpless to stop it. I want and need him in a way that's terrifying.

"Vitaly," I moan, digging my fingers in harder to his broad shoulders as he brings me closer and closer to the breaking point.

He growls against me, the vibrations sending me spiraling over the edge. His strong hands on my hips are the only thing keeping me upright. I throw my head back and let the pleasure consume me as he licks and sucks and keeps the orgasm going until I'm so sensitive I'm squirming in his hands. He gives a deep, sexy laugh before giving my clit a gentle kiss.

His face is flushed and his stubble is glistening with my arousal when he pulls his head out from under my dress. Vitaly always looks sexy, but seeing him like this when he's covered in my release and looking at me like a man who's completely in love, it makes my breath catch in my throat. The man is fucking stunning, and I still can't believe he's mine.

I cup his face, running my thumb over his sexy stubble. "I was so afraid my brother was marrying me off to a man old enough to be my grandfather."

He smiles and turns his head just enough so he can kiss my palm. "I would've had to kill him and kidnap you for myself."

"I also thought you'd be a monster like my brothers."

His whiskey-brown eyes meet mine. "I am a monster, baby, but I'm not the same kind they are."

"Let's go so we can get back and you can tell me exactly who I've married and what my new family is involved in."

His face softens as he kisses my hand again. "Deal, baby." He grabs my panties and looks up at me. "I changed my mind. I love knowing you're not wearing these under your dress, but I can't let you do it when other men are around. It's for me only."

I step into them, letting him slowly slide them up my legs. He gives my pussy one last kiss before pulling my panties all the way up. Before he stands, he looks down at my feet in the heels I'm wearing. "Those are going to hurt your feet again."

The worry in his voice makes me smile. "I'll be fine. I'm not wearing them for long."

He doesn't look convinced, but he stands and then gets down my long, black coat. "It's cold," is all he says as he helps me into it.

I'm still smiling when we leave our room. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to having someone worry about me. We slip out of the penthouse and make the drive to my brothers' house. Vitaly keeps his hand on my thigh the whole time, giving reassuring squeezes the closer we get, knowing how nervous I'm getting.

"I can't show how much I love you in front of your brothers, *ptichka*," he warns when we're only a few miles away. "It's for your own protection. You'll be at risk if they think they can use you to hurt me."

"I know." I look over at him, studying his profile. He glances over and gives me a quick wink.

"I know how this works," I remind him. "I know you can't have any weaknesses in front of them."

He sighs and gives my thigh one last squeeze before pulling up to the large gate in front of my brothers' property. The guard looks in, and when he sees who it is, he nods and motions for the other guard to open the gate.

As we drive through, Vitaly grabs my hand and kisses the back of it.

"It's showtime, *ptichka*. Let's see if I can manage to hide how goddamn much I love you."

After he parks the car, he cups my face and kisses me gently.

"This is the last fucking time you will ever be here. You're my wife now, and that means you're under my protection. No one can hurt you, no one can touch you, and if they do, I'll fucking kill them."

I nod, but he doesn't seem satisfied with what he sees in my eyes, so he kisses me again, savoring the taste and feel of me until we can't delay going in any longer.

"I love you," I whisper against his lips, and I smile at the way his eyes turn so damn soft and sweet at hearing me say it.

"I love you, too, *ptichka*."

He gets out of the car and walks around to open my door. When I first stand up, I wince the tiniest bit, and he looks down at my heels and then back up at me, raising his brow in an *I fucking told you* kind of way that makes me laugh.

"They're fine," I whisper. "Stop worrying."

He holds his arm out for me and whispers back, "Never, baby."

We walk up the stairs together, and I use his arm for support. Not that I'll ever admit it to him, but I really wish I hadn't worn these damn high heels because my feet are really starting to hurt.

The front door opens as soon as we reach the top step, and I recognize the woman who answers it as one of the servants I'd met the first day I arrived here. It feels like forever since I've been here, but as soon as I step foot in the house, my entire childhood comes rushing back to me. This may not be the house I grew up in, but the feel of it is the same, and the fear that threatens to consume me shocks the hell out of me. Vitaly immediately notices and leans in so his mouth is by my ear.

“Just breathe, *ptichka*.”

When he hears me take in a deep breath, he whispers, “Good girl, baby, just like that. No one will ever hurt you again. I promise. I’m not leaving your side today.”

I feel his lips against my ear, and the sound of his voice calms me like nothing else ever has. I let it become my anchor; I let *him* become my anchor, the one thing that I’m tethered to that will be strong for me so that I don’t always have to be. I’ve been scared of my brothers my whole life, and I’m tired of always being afraid. I feel like the anxiety lessens its grip on me when Vitaly is near. I know he’ll keep me safe and that I no longer need to fear them.

“Glad you two could make it.”

At the sound of Konstantin’s voice, Vitaly kisses the shell of my ear and whispers, “You’re mine now, *ptichka*. I will always protect you.”

He gives me one more kiss before pulling away and giving my brother a smile. “Good to see you again.”

The transformation is so seamless that I’d never suspect anything if I hadn’t heard for myself the sweet things he’d just been whispering in my ear. He brings his hand to the nape of my neck, making it look like it’s a possessive, domineering move, but he’s secretly caressing my skin with his thumb, the gentle touch a constant reminder that I’m safe and loved. Two things that I never felt before I met Vitaly. The man I was forced to marry, the man I was convinced was a monster like my brothers, is the only person in my life who’s ever shown me what real love is.

“You two are looking well,” Konstantin says, eyeing me like he’s trying to determine whether or not I’ve been obeying him or displeasing him. His eyes turn to Vitaly, and he seems satisfied by what he sees in my husband,

so he smiles down at me and gives me an obligatory hug that sends a wave of disgust over me.

“There’s our little sister.” Osip walks over to join us, taking the cue from Konstantin and hugging me like he actually gives a shit about me. “We’ve missed you around here.”

I bite my tongue to stop the harsh laugh I want to give and instead say, “This place is so big. I’m surprised you’ve even noticed I’ve been gone.”

Konstantin ignores my comment and turns to Vitaly. “I take it the marriage is going well.”

“Very well,” Vitaly says as we follow my brothers into the dining room that’s been set up for lunch. “If I would’ve known marriage was going to be this good, I would’ve done it years ago.”

My brothers notice when I take a step and wince because of the pain in my foot. Konstantin lifts a brow at Vitaly, assuming I’m wincing and sore because he’s beat me or fucked me too roughly.

Vitaly shrugs and gives an easy laugh. “What can I say? I’ve got a big cock.”

They share a man laugh while Vitaly pulls my chair out for me, letting his fingers run along my back before he takes his own seat next to me. When I look over at him, he’s wearing his mask, and I can’t help but be impressed at how damn good he is at this. I mean, he’s not wrong. He does have a giant cock and I am sore as fuck from it, but he’s made it seem like he’s been raping me for the last several days, and when I look over at my brothers, I can tell they’re pleased with the news. Konstantin even gives me a small nod of approval, reminding me yet again how sick and twisted my family is.

“Where’s Oksana?” I ask, looking around for her.

“She wasn’t feeling well today.”

I search Konstantin’s face, but he can be just as unreadable as Vitaly when he wants to be. Not feeling well could be anything from *she’s taken too many drugs and can’t function well enough to be here to I became enraged last night and killed her*. I’m desperately hoping it’s the former and she’s upstairs passed out in a state of bliss that her own reality can never give her.

“Please tell her that I hope she’s feeling better soon.”

Konstantin smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I will.”

While my brothers start eating, I chance a quick look at Vitaly, wondering if he's as miserable as I am at being here again.

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Chapter 10

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Vitaly

I have a feeling this is going to be the longest lunch of my life. All my instincts scream at me to get her out of here, but I can't do that. I can't risk everything just so we can run out of here. I can't risk Alina for that, so I look over at Konstantin's smug face and smile like everything is perfect and not like I want to reach across the table and rip his goddamn throat out.

"So what have the newlyweds been up to?" Osip studies us with a slight smirk playing at his lips. "I mean besides the obvious."

"I've been busy with the club," I tell them. "Let me know when you both can come by, and I'll arrange something special."

Konstantin smiles. "We'll do that."

We're saved from more awkward conversation when several women walk in carrying plates of food. Soon the table is piled with salads and pasta and freshly baked bread. When the woman closest to me offers me wine, I gladly nod my head and motion for her to fill the glass in front of me, and when mine is full, I wave a hand towards Katya's glass, knowing she probably needs it even more than I do.

I give her thigh a squeeze under the table, forcing myself to not think about her cute cotton panties. I can still smell her feminine musky scent on my face, and I hesitate to take my first drink of wine, knowing it's going to wash away the faint taste of her pussy that still lingers on my tongue. I need the alcohol, though, so I take a healthy drink promising myself I'll bury my head between her legs again as soon as I can. I'm addicted to my wife and I always want to smell and taste like her.

Konstantin waves a dismissive hand at his staff, and they leave with a quickness that makes it obvious they're terrified of the two men. I'd seen

bruises on the woman who had served me, and I know there are probably several more hidden beneath the simple black dress she's wearing. I feel damn sorry for any women these men own. I'm guessing they're brutal behind closed doors.

Forcing myself to eat, I can't help but wonder what Katya's life was like with them. She must've been constantly terrified, and when I think about the kind of man she could've easily been forced to marry, my fingers tighten around my fork. I can't imagine another man's hands on my wife, another man violently taking her virginity like she'd assumed I was going to do on our wedding night.

Squeezing her thigh again, I remind myself that she's safe and with me and that no one will ever hurt her again. She's so quickly become the most important thing in my life, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. I swore I'd never fall in love, and then I went and did it in record time.

Konstantin breaks the silence when he reaches for more bread and says, "Tell Matvey we have a new shipment coming in soon. There might be something in it he's interested in."

I take my time swallowing the mouthful of pasta I just took. "I'll let him know," I say, knowing there's not a chance in hell that Matvey will ever get a pet or anything else that involves a woman who isn't Alina.

We spend the rest of the lunch talking about the auction they have planned for next month. They briefly mention the disappearance of the doctor they had on their payroll, and it takes everything I have to not laugh and tell them that my brothers and I tortured him for information before finally allowing him the death he'd been begging us for. They've recently hired a new doctor and everything is all set for the upcoming shipment of women.

"So you'll be here for a while then?" I ask.

"We like it here," Osip says.

Konstantin smiles and waves a woman over, motioning for her to start clearing the table of our plates. I'm fully aware that Katya's barely eaten anything, but I'm not about to demand she finish her plate now. I'll grab her something on the way home so she's not hungry.

I nearly groan in frustration when the two women come back carrying dessert. I just want to get the fuck out of here, but I'm obviously going to have to wait a little bit longer before we can make our escape. Keeping my hand firmly on Katya's thigh, I manage a few bites of lemon cake before I

set my fork down and call it quits. I've fucking played nice long enough. I'm not going to be able to manage it for much longer.

"Well, thanks for lunch," I say, setting my napkin down and hoping like hell the two men in front of me will take the fucking hint. They do not, or they just willfully choose to ignore it. I'm guessing it's the latter based on the amused glint in Konstantin's eyes.

He stands and smiles. "Let's have a drink in the other room."

I bite back the heavy sigh I want to give and stand before helping Katya with her chair. While I grab her hand, Konstantin gives a soft laugh. "She can stay here and visit with Osip. It'll give us a chance to talk more business."

I feel Katya stiffen beside me, but I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her closer. "You wouldn't separate newlyweds so quickly, would you? I've actually grown quite attached to my little wife."

I give her ass a squeeze and pull her even harder against me. "In fact, I think we might just skip the drinks altogether." I give her brothers a big smile. "Maybe we can do this again soon. Right now I have plans with your sister that I'm guessing you don't want to know about."

Osip looks like he wants to argue, but Konstantin lets out a small laugh and shakes his head at me. "I'm happy our sister is taking such good care of you. I had a feeling you two would be a good match."

I've never wanted to punch someone so badly in my life. Like hell he did. He would've thrown Katya to any man he thought would further his business, and now he's standing here acting like he's been making love matches and playing Cupid. What a smug fucking bastard.

Squeezing Katya's ass like the lifeline it's become, I smile at her oldest brother. "You were right. I thought for sure I'd hate marriage, but it's nice having a beautiful woman pick up after me and spread her legs anytime I want."

I laugh and Katya's hand slips under my suit jacket so she can dig her nails into my back, letting me know I'll be paying for that one later. Since my gun is within easy reach of her angry hand, I figure it's best to not press my luck, so I hold out my hand to Konstantin and say, "We can meet soon with my brothers to discuss the upcoming auction and how to handle security."

"Sounds good." Konstantin gives Katya another goodbye hug that makes my skin crawl before Osip does the same. It's the last time they'll

ever see her. They'll never fucking breathe the same air as her again.

With my arm back firmly around her waist so I'm not only keeping her close to me, but also making sure she keeps most her weight off her damn feet, we make our way back to the front door. The same woman hands us our coats, and when Katya takes hers, she gives the woman a sympathetic smile and a very quick arm squeeze. As soon as she hears footsteps behind us, though, she drops her hand and looks away. She doesn't acknowledge the woman's presence again. It's as if she's invisible to her.

We say goodbye and once I hear the door shut behind us, I let out a deep breath and give a soft laugh. "Fuck me, baby, I hate your family. Can you imagine doing Christmas with those icy bastards? I'm so glad you'll never be seeing them again."

"Me too." She rests her head on my arm as we walk to the car. "And they weren't fun at Christmas at all, so you're not missing out."

I open the car door for her and help her in. Leaning down, I undo her stupid heels and throw them on the backseat. Looking up, I give her a wink.

"I'm a lot of fun at Christmas. I also like to wear the pajamas with the feet in them. I have a nice set with red reindeer on them."

She laughs and shakes her head like she doesn't believe me. "You do not."

I stand up and before I shut the door in her cute face, I say, "I do, and we're getting you a matching pair. We need Christmas pictures in the ugliest Christmas sweaters we can find, and I want to see you naked and tied up in Christmas lights, maybe I'll even put a candy cane up your ass."

I laugh at her shocked face and shut the door. She'd look sexy as hell on her hands and knees, bound with lights, and a festive candy cane sticking out of her ass. If that doesn't scream holiday cheer, I don't know what does. I might even add a cute headband with reindeer antlers. God, the holidays are going to be so fucking fun with her.

I'm still smiling when I get in the driver's side and head down the long driveway and out the gate. Before I take us back to the penthouse, I run through a drive-thru and order her a cheeseburger meal.

"We just ate."

I look over at her. "No, we just sat down for lunch, but you didn't eat hardly anything."

She looks in the bag. "I can't eat all this, Vitaly. I ate almost half my plate at my brothers'." She digs around and pulls out two cheeseburgers.

“Seriously?”

I laugh. “I have complete faith in you, baby.”

She hands me a cheeseburger. “You eat one and I’ll eat one and then we can split the large fry you ordered.” Grabbing the vanilla shake, she takes a big drink. “I’m probably going to keep this for myself, though.”

“My wife is so fucking bossy,” I mutter with a laugh before taking a bite of the cheeseburger.

“My husband is so fucking stubborn,” she counters. “And oh my god, I almost smacked you in there when you were all like *my wife can’t walk because I fucked her so hard with my giant wiener. Oh and by the way, wives are awesome because they pick up my mess and spread their legs. Win-win, I love being married.*”

I’m laughing so hard I almost choke on my cheeseburger, and when we get to a red light, I look over and say, “Please don’t ever refer to my cock as a wiener again.”

She smiles and shrugs. “It is a really big wiener.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groan. “Keep calling it a wiener and it’ll never get big again.”

“I might have to test that theory.”

“Please don’t.”

She gives another shrug and drinks her shake, and she’s so fucking cute it makes me smile every damn time I look at her. We’ve just finished sharing the fries when I pull into the underground parking garage.

“So all secrets are about to be revealed?” she asks.

Turning the car off, I look over at her. “If you’re sure you’re fine cutting ties with your brothers, then yes.”

“I’m more than sure. I never want to step foot in that fucking house or be near them again.” She hesitates for a few seconds before asking, “You promise you don’t traffic women or keep pets?”

I brush back a strand of her hair and cup her face. “I promise, baby. We don’t do that.”

In a voice that’s so quiet I have to strain to hear her, she says, “I was twelve when I first realized what my brothers were involved in. I walked into the dining room and found a naked woman chained to the table. She looked so hungry and the plate of food was just out of reach, so I gave her the food and tried to free her, but I couldn’t, so I ran to get Konstantin.”

I have to force myself to remain relaxed because I know exactly where this story is headed, and my heart fucking breaks at the idea of Katya being so young and having to learn about how ugly the world can be.

“He followed me to the dining room and then made me watch as he beat her. He told me it was my fault because I’d tried to help her.”

When the tears fall, she makes no move to brush them away. She’s too lost in the memory to even notice them.

“He made me sit with her until she died, and then he told me that the next time I tried to help one of his pets, he’d force me to kill them, even if that meant just holding my hand against the handle of the knife as he stabbed them himself.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groan, pulling her against me as she starts to sob.

“I always just ignore them now. I’m such a fucking coward.”

“No, baby.” I kiss her head and run my fingers through her hair, holding her shaking body tightly against mine. “You’re so goddamn brave. I don’t know how in the hell you’ve even managed to survive being around them, and you’ve not only survived, but you’ve managed to grow into the sweetest, most talented, and beautiful woman I’ve ever met.” I kiss the shell of her ear. “You’re a goddamn miracle, *ptichka*, and I want to fucking kill your brothers for what they’ve put you through.”

“I’m okay now,” she whispers against my neck, clinging to me as if her life depends on it, and I hold her tighter, letting her know that I’ll happily be her lifeline. She will never have to worry about anything ever again, because I’m taking care of her now. If her brothers want to try and hurt her, then they’re going to have to go through me and all my brothers. We’re a family now, and we fucking protect what’s ours.

“I want you to come inside and hear the truth of what my family is up to, but I need to ask you something first.”

“What?”

I rub her back at the sound of her shaky voice and kiss her again. “Please don’t mention what happened when you were twelve. Please don’t tell them any details about how you’ve seen pets get treated.”

The very thought of Matvey hearing those details makes my goddamn chest hurt. It will kill him. I know she’s confused, so I say, “I promise you’ll understand why I’m asking once you hear everything. I have my reasons, baby. I just need you to trust me.”

She nods her head and kisses my neck. “I do trust you. I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you.”

Cupping the back of her head, I hold her for a few more minutes before she pulls back and gives me as big of a smile as she can manage with bloodshot eyes and tear-streaked cheeks. “How bad do I look?”

“You could never look bad, *ptichka*.” I brush the backs of my knuckles along her cheek. “You look sad, baby, and that’s something I hope I can help with, because I never want you looking sad again. I’ll do everything I can to make sure you’re always happy.” I kiss the tip of her cute nose. “I’ll do anything for you.”

“And I’ll do anything for you.”

I smile and give her a wink. “Anything, huh? Because I could probably come up with a few things.”

The sound of her laughter filling the car makes me feel like I can breathe a little easier.

“I bet you could.” She gives me a sweet kiss, the kind of kiss that only she’s ever given me, the kind that’s filled with love and not a selfish need to get off or to claim me in some way. Katya’s a giver, and I’ve only ever been around women who are takers. I had no idea it could be like this.

Giving her one last kiss, I pull back and say, “Let’s go upstairs. I’m tired of having secrets between us. You’re a Melnikov now. You need to know what’s going on.”

She nods and gives me a smile, but when she starts to reach back for her heels, I laugh and grab her wrist.

“I don’t fucking think so. I’m carrying your stubborn ass upstairs.”

Before she can argue, I get out and walk around to her side. Picking her up bridal style, I kick my car door shut and carry her to the elevator. She laughs and wraps an arm around my neck, knowing there’s no talking me out of this.

Once the doors open, I give her another kiss before carefully setting her down. I help her with her coat and then get rid of mine along with my suit jacket. Taking her hand, I lead her into the living room where everyone is already waiting. I knew Danil would see us on the security feed, so I’m not at all surprised to see he’s gathered everyone together.

“Are you sure about this?” Roman asks her. He’s sitting on the couch with Emily tucked in next to him, one hand resting protectively on her

round belly. An image of a pregnant Katya hits me hard, and instead of running away like my ass is on fire, I smile and kiss the top of her head.

“I’m sure,” Katya tells him. “This was the last time I’ll ever see my brothers.” Gripping my arm, she looks up at me. “Can I ask for something?”

“You can ask for whatever you want,” I tell her.

“If you and your brothers are planning on taking out the Lebedev Bratva, will you spare Oksana? She never wanted to be married to Konstantin. It was forced on her, and her life has been a living hell ever since they were married.”

I cup her face and kiss her forehead. “I promise no harm will come to her unless she tries to go against us.”

Her shoulders relax at my promise. “She would never do that. She’ll help you pull the damn trigger.”

I look over at my brothers before sitting down, pulling Katya into my lap. I kiss her shoulder before I start explaining everything.

“My brothers and I are a family by choice. We grew up in Moscow together, but there’s one family member that’s not here.” I point at Roman. “Alina, Roman’s sister, was kidnapped by sex traffickers close to two years ago, and we’ve spent every second since then trying to find her.”

She turns her head to look at me. “You think my brothers are behind it?”

“We know they are,” Danil says. “Simona was taken by the Lebedev Bratva, and I bought her at one of their auctions. The plan was to save someone and see if she could give us any information and then we’d let her go.” He smiles and kisses his wife. “Obviously, those plans changed, but we did end up learning that your brothers were behind everything. Their Bratva was active in the area where Alina was taken, and they’re the only ones powerful enough at the time to have pulled it off.”

“You were behind Stefan’s disappearance?” Katya asks.

I look over at her. “You know about Stefan?”

She nods and leans back against me. “I heard my brothers talking about him. They have no idea what happened to him, though.” Her blue eyes dart from me to my brothers. “I’m guessing he won’t be turning up anytime soon.”

Lev gives a soft laugh. “He will not be.”

“I never met him,” Katya says, “but I know you did the world a favor.”

“We did,” Danil says, tightening his grip on Simona.

"We need to know how your brothers keep track of the women," Matvey says, speaking for the first time. "How can we find Alina?"

"I don't know. My brothers don't include me in their business. They assigned someone to watch me, and no one was allowed to even look at me. I was invisible."

"That's good, though," Matvey cuts in. "Surely you heard something."

I hear the desperation in his voice, and I know how badly he wants this, but I also know Katya isn't lying when she says she doesn't know anything.

"They kept her out of it," I tell him. "But that doesn't mean we won't be able to find Alina. We have the fuckers. We can grab them and get the information out of them."

"They're very well protected," Katya warns. "It won't be easy, and my brothers are cruel. They don't give a shit about anyone. They won't care about your sister, and they'll enjoy knowing you're worried about her."

Matvey's dark eyes meet Katya's. "She's not my sister. She's the woman I'm in love with and the woman I'm going to marry. I can promise you that I will be able to break your brothers and get the information I need out of them."

Katya looks at me, and I can tell my words from earlier are running through her head. She understands now why I asked her to not bring up how pets are treated. It would only hurt Matvey to hear it. He's already imagined enough horrific things; he doesn't need to learn they're all true.

"Maybe I can help," she starts to say, and I immediately cut her off.

"Not a chance in hell, *ptichka*."

Her brow is furrowed in irritation when she looks back at me. "Why not?"

"Because I won't allow you to be put in danger."

"Allow me?"

My little bird is getting pissed, and when I smile at her tone, her look makes it clear I shouldn't have. I'm going to have to fuck that attitude out of her later, and that thought has me grinning even bigger.

"You're terrible," she mutters before turning back to my brothers. "How did you all get rid of the Italian threat? I heard Konstantin talking about it. They told me I had to marry Vitaly because they know how strong your Bratva is and they need your help keeping them away so their business can continue to run smoothly. They also wanted the strip club connection."

Lev smiles. “Dominic Alessi is a bit of a friend of ours. We met under unusual circumstances, but it turns out his sister was also taken by your brothers’ Bratva. She was taken and sold, and when her beaten body washed up to shore, the only clue he had to go on was that fucking viper tattoo.”

I feel Katya shudder in my lap, and the look on her face has me hooking a finger under her chin and forcing her face to mine. “You are not responsible for what they do.”

“It’s my family,” she whispers. “It’s my blood that did this.”

“Blood doesn’t mean shit,” I tell her. “That’s why my brothers and I chose to become a family. The ones we were born into weren’t worth keeping.” I run my thumb over her cheek. “You’re not to blame for any of this. You’re a victim, baby, just like all the other women your brothers have abused and hurt. It may not be in the same way, but it’s abuse all the same.”

“We would never blame you for what they’ve done,” Matvey tells her. When she turns her head to meet his dark eyes, he adds, “But we are going to kill them, and you need to be aware of that.”

“I know.” Her voice is small but steady. “They can’t be allowed to keep doing what they’re doing, and death is the only thing that will stop them. I just don’t want any more women getting hurt.”

She rests against me when I pull her close and kiss her head. I run my fingers through her hair as my brothers fill her in on everything that’s happened since Roman first meet Emily when he was gathering information on her dad, to the auction with Simona, the death of Stefan, and our meeting Dominic, and finally ending with her brother’s interest in Lev’s underground fights and our arrangement with the Alessi mafia. Katya’s quiet when we finally stop talking.

I brush the back of one knuckle along her cheek. “You okay?”

“It’s just a lot to take in.” She gives me and my brothers a small smile. “If it makes you feel any better, Konstantin and Osip have no fucking clue they’re being played.” After she says it, her smile grows and then she lets out the cutest damn laugh. “It’s perfect.”

She grips my thigh and turns to look back at me. “They have a lot of men, though. Konstantin always keeps twenty well-trained men around him. He never travels far without them, and that’s on top of all the other men in his Bratva. Men are constantly guarding the house, walking the property line, and there are security cameras everywhere.”

“I can handle the cameras,” Danil says. Simona gives him a smile that shows how damn proud she is of her husband’s skills. He gives her a quick wink before looking back at us. “Do you know if Konstantin has a laptop that he uses a lot or where he might keep it?”

Katya thinks for a minute. “I only know what I’ve managed to catch small glimpses of. They’re usually very careful to keep me out of it, but there is a guy in the Bratva who comes over and he’s always carrying a messenger bag, almost like he has equipment with him or something, and they always disappear into Konstantin’s office when he arrives.”

The mention of a messenger bag has me raising a brow at Danil because that’s exactly what Danil is always lugging around. The man has a hard time being away from his laptop. It’s gotten a lot better since Simona, but that thing was practically glued to his ass for a solid decade.

“Do you know his name?” Danil asks.

“I’m trying to remember. I think it might’ve been Casimir.” She nods. “Yeah, I definitely heard Konstantin call him Casimir once.”

“Can you remember anything else?” Matvey asks.

“No, I’m sorry. If I go back, maybe I can sneak into his office, though.”

“Absolutely not,” I say. “Your part in this is officially over.”

Emily smiles over at her. “He’ll never budge. Trust me on that one.” She looks up at her husband, most likely remembering how he told her the same damn thing.

“Damn straight I won’t.” I tighten my grip on her waist.

Katya tries to look mad, but she’s too busy looking like she’s head over heels in love with me. I can’t help but return her smile. When I look back at my family, the look on Emily’s face makes me laugh. It’s the most *I fucking told you so* look I’ve ever seen in my life. She’s never going to let me live it down, but I don’t care.

“Good thing he learned how to put a crib together,” Simona says, making Jolene laugh.

“Hey, at least I’ve got someone who can back me up on movie nights. You like action movies, right, *ptichka*?”

To my absolute horror, she looks at me and says, “I actually really love historical romances.”

When everyone starts laughing, I look at Katya and feel instant relief when I realize she’s joking around. I look over at Emily, the most likely sister-in-law behind this.

“Did you put her up to that?”

“Me?” The look of pure fake, shocked horror makes me roll my eyes.

“Yeah, you’d never do something like this.” I point at Roman. “Your wife is a trouble maker.”

Katya laughs. “I saw the rules on the fridge, remember?”

“Don’t scare me like that.” I give her a kiss. “You almost gave me a fucking heart attack.”

“We should’ve kept that going and made them all watch another three-hour Jane Austen adaptation,” Simona says with a laugh.

I look at Katya. “You see what I’ve been dealing with? Fucking lunatics, every damn one of them.”

She smiles and kisses me. “I’ll watch action movies anytime you want.”

“See? How could I not fall in love with you?”

“Impossible not to.” Her big smile makes laugh.

“Damn straight, *ptichka*.”

“We need to meet with Dominic soon,” Roman says, pulling me from my adorable wife.

“We do,” I agree.

“Do you know if Konstantin is planning on going to Pink anytime soon?” Danil asks me.

“I’m not sure. I told him to let me know and that we’d plan something special for him.”

He nods and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “I’m going to see if I can get him to introduce me to Casimir. It makes sense that I’d want to know about their security, so I don’t see any issues with asking for a meeting with the guy. Maybe I can figure out where they’re putting all the information about the women they traffic.”

Matvey taps his foot, unable to keep still, and when it’s not enough, he gets up and starts pacing. “I’m not sure how much longer I can wait before I just start killing them one by one.”

“Just don’t start yet,” I tell him. “We’re too close to fuck this up now.”

I know he already knows this, but it’s good to remind him every now and then. I know how close he is to losing control. It’s been slipping for a while now, and he’s on the brink of a complete breakdown, and if that happens, we’re going to have one hell of a bloodbath on our hands.

“You’ll be killing them soon enough,” Lev reminds him. “We just need to know where she is first, and then you can go on a rampage.” His lip ring

moves with his wicked smile. “Hell, I’m looking forward to helping you with that.”

Even though we’re talking about eliminating Katya’s brothers, she doesn’t seem the slightest bit upset by it. Based on the serene smile on her face, I’d say she’s actually looking forward to it happening. She was raised in a Bratva; she’s no stranger to violence. It’s obvious from what she’s told me that she can’t tolerate that violence when it’s directed against innocent women, but this is something entirely different. This is a rage she can get behind. I smile because it feels like a family event now. Some people have barbecues; the Melnikovs have bloody rampages. To each his own, I guess.

When Matvey goes upstairs to beat the shit out of one of the punching bags, I stand up, taking Katya with me. She laughs and throws her arms around me for balance.

“What are you up to?” Her breath is whisper-soft against the shell of my ear.

I give her earlobe a soft bite. “It’s been too goddamn long since I’ve heard my wife scream my name.”

Chapter 11

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Katya

As soon as Vitaly gets us through the bedroom door, he's kicking it shut and kissing me like it's been years since he had his mouth on me instead of hours. Our tongues clash for dominance, but when he fists the back of my hair, demanding I submit to him, I do it with a moan, melting against his touch. The kiss turns slow as he savors the taste and feel of me. Vitaly doesn't just kiss me; he possesses every goddamn inch of me. Every part of me belongs to him, and I can tell by the satisfied growl he gives that he knows it.

Still kissing me, he sets me on the bed and brings his hand up my thigh and between my legs, roughly yanking my panties off. When his fingers graze my inner thighs and he feels how wet I am, he groans and gives my bottom lip a soft bite.

“So fucking wet for me, baby.” I feel him smile against my lips as he slowly drags a finger along my slit. “This little cunt is sloppy, so fucking wet you’re dripping down your thighs.” His tongue slowly runs along the seam of my lips as his finger does the same to my pussy, and the sensation has me moaning and rocking my hips up to him. He lets out a sexy, deep laugh and dips his finger inside just enough to have my back arching off the bed and my fingers digging into his back for more.

“It pains me to see my wife so sexually unsatisfied,” he murmurs against my lips. “I wonder how many times I should make you come.”

His finger dips inside me before pulling back out, the teasing thrust making me let out a needy whimper. He nibbles a line along my jaw, working his way to my neck.

Nipping the delicate skin beneath my ear, he murmurs against my skin, “I wonder if I can make you pass out from coming too much.”

“What?”

He gives a soft laugh before licking my neck and blowing a breath against my sensitive skin. It sends a ripple of pleasure through me that makes it impossible to do anything except cling to him and feel what he’s giving me. He keeps teasing my pussy, slowly dipping in further and further, curling his finger inside me and hitting some crazy sensitive spot that leaves my entire body shaking with need.

His deep laugh is sexy as hell, the sound vibrating against my skin as he kisses along my collarbone. He’s so fucking skilled with his fingers that the orgasm takes me by complete surprise. It effortlessly crashes into me, pulling a surprised gasp from my parted lips before I moan his name and cling to him as my body tenses and my whole world turns to pure bliss.

“That’s one, *ptichka*,” he growls against my skin, rimming my clit as he keeps the orgasm going. I tug on his shirt, desperate to feel him. “Always so eager to get me naked,” he teases, but he’s not wrong. Any excuse to see Vitaly without clothes is a good one. I’m of the firm opinion that any time we’re behind closed doors, he shouldn’t be wearing a damn thing except his sexy smile.

When I don’t stop tugging, he laughs and sits up, pinning me in place with his heated stare. I watch him unbutton his shirt, slowly revealing the tattooed, chiseled chest and abs that I will never be able to get enough of.

“You’re too perfect,” I tell him, making him give that sexy laugh again.

“Already drunk on orgasms and I’ve only given you one. Better hang in there, baby, you’ve got a long way to go.”

I laugh because there’s no way he’s going to make me pass out from coming too much. I mean is that even a real thing?

He tosses his shirt aside and leans closer, dragging his nose slowly along my cheek. “You’re looking very confident. My *ptichka* is so sure I can’t do it.” His teeth graze my jaw before I feel the wet heat of his tongue give me a slow, sensual lick. “I’m looking forward to seeing your stunned face when you wake back up.” He nips at the skin along my neck, slowly working his way down as he murmurs, “You’ll look at me like I’m your god. Won’t you, baby?”

“Fuck,” I gasp when he gives the crook of my neck a hard suck.

“Soon, sweetheart,” he whispers, “but first you need to come all over my hand again like a good girl.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond, just slides another finger into me while his thumb continues to work my clit.

“You hear how wet you are?” His lips dance along my skin, making goosebumps rise across my chest and arms. “I think you like having your husband’s hand on your pussy. Isn’t that right, baby?”

When I don’t answer fast enough, he gives my clit a soft squeeze that has me bucking up against him.

“Answer me, or the next pinch will be harder.”

“Yes,” I manage to rasp before he pulls an embarrassingly loud moan from me. His laugh is dark and seductive and when I drag my nails up his spine, he groans and grinds his hard cock against my thigh. “You feel what you fucking do to me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

He rocks his hips again, letting me feel how goddamn big he is.

“You’ll be coming all over my cock soon enough.” He drags the hard, thick length of him down my thigh. “I wonder how many I can get out of you.” The fingers of his other hand slip beneath the neckline of my dress before he pulls hard, ripping fabric and baring my tits to him. The way he’s rubbing my clit makes it impossible for me to give the slightest fuck about my ruined dress.

His mouth is latched onto my nipple in the next moment while he speeds up his fingers, quickly pushing me over the edge again. I’m no longer in control of my body. He’s steering this ship, and he’s determined to crash me against the damn rocks again and again.

“That’s two, sweetheart, and here comes three.”

I’m about to tell him that there’s no way in hell I can come again this quickly, but the words lie trapped in my throat, turning to a guttural scream as my body lets go again. I already know with every fiber of my being that tonight is going to be a night of him proving me wrong, of him pushing me past what I think my body can take, and of him reminding me again and again who owns every part of me.

“Feeling faint already?”

I’m having a hell of a time keeping my eyes even half open, but I’m coherent enough to see the smug look on his face before he slips his fingers from my pussy and licks them clean.

“Enjoy your breather, *ptichka*, because this is the only one you’re going to get.”

He lifts up, unbuckling his belt and popping the button on his pants while his eyes rake over my already spent body. My dress is bunched up and ripped open, my hair is a mess, my thighs are shaking, and I’m breathing like I’ve just run a mile.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, pulling his zipper down and stripping out of his pants and boxer briefs. He gives another laugh when my eyes immediately zero in on his massive cock. He wraps his hand around his shaft and slowly strokes himself.

“Is this what you want, baby?”

“Yes.” My voice is barely more than whisper, already raspy from screaming his name.

He’s still smiling when he gets on the bed and hovers his powerful body over mine. He settles between my thighs so his thick shaft is pressed firmly against my pussy. With one slow rock of his hips, he drags along my lips as my nails dig into his shoulders and my back arches off the bed.

“So fucking wet,” he growls. “You’re already soaking me, baby.”

He keeps slowly working his hips, gliding along my sensitive folds until I’m begging him to fuck me.

“You want me inside you?”

“Yes.”

“Show me how much you want it. Let me feel you come again. I want to feel your pussy lips clenching as you scream my name. I want to feel how fucking desperate you are to have me inside you.”

“I can’t take any more.” My words come out as a breathless plea that he ignores with a smile, pressing harder against me so every stroke hits my overly sensitive clit.

“You’re such an ass,” I growl right before another orgasm hits me. His deep laugh mixes with my ragged scream of pleasure and when he feels my release hit his cock, he groans and cups one of my tits, pinching my nipple hard so there’s a tinge of pain with the ecstasy he’s giving me.

When I start to come down, he circles his hips, sending aftershocks through every part of me as he lowers his head and slowly runs his tongue over my throbbing nipple. By the time he starts to slide into me, I’m barely hanging on.

“Vitaly,” I gasp, feeling him spread me to the point of pain.

“I’ve got you, *ptichka*. I’ve always got you.”

The heat of his breath hits my wet nipple as my fingers run through his hair. He slams into me, keeping a pace that makes it impossible for my body to resist him. I pull his hair, wanting his mouth on mine, and when he gives me what I want and I feel his warm lips on mine, I kiss him like I’ll never be able to stop. Part of me fears that I’ll never be able to pull away from him, that I’ll suffocate before I break contact for air, the other part of me doesn’t give a flying fuck if I suffocate beneath him. That’s the part I listen to, and by the time the next orgasm hits me, I’m already seeing stars.

“I can’t.” I mean to cry it out, but the two words become little more than a ragged whisper, barely heard over our mixed groans of pleasure and the sounds of our bodies coming together with every hard thrust he’s giving me.

His teeth graze my bottom lip before he growls, “You can, and you will.”

He’s not going to take pity on me or give me the mercy I’m begging for. He’s dead set on destroying me in the best way possible, and god help me, I want him to. I want him to obliterate every part of me. I want him to burn me to ashes, so he’s forced to breathe me in. I want to mark him and claim him just as much as he’s doing to me. I never want to be free of him. I always want us tangled up together and so closely connected that there will never be any separating us. I know what life is like without Vitaly, and I never want to experience it again.

His thrusts become deeper and harder as his kisses turn slower and sweeter, and the combination has my mind completely shutting down. All I can do is feel, and in this moment I give him everything, every fucking part of myself. When I start to come again, my ears are ringing, my vision is spotty, and I know I’m about to pass out. My breaths are erratic, my limbs weak, and the last thing I remember is Vitaly’s whispered “I love you,” before everything turns black and I lose myself in a dark, peaceful bliss that I never could’ve imagined existed.

When I wake, it’s still dark outside and there’s a tattooed arm wrapped tightly around me. Even though I’m still exhausted, I’m smiling like an idiot. Happiness is never anything I thought I would have. It didn’t even factor into my thinking, because I just assumed I’d never have it, but Vitaly makes it happen so effortlessly.

His chest is pressed against my back, and the deep, even sound of his breaths lets me know he’s still asleep. I’m using his bicep as a pillow, and

with his arm stretched out, I'm able to see the magpie tattoo. I still can't believe he did it. No one's ever paid any attention to my art, but Vitaly loved it so much that he chose to have it permanently marked on his beautiful skin.

Being careful to not wake him, I lift my head and press my lips against the bird, giving it a soft kiss. As soon as he feels my mouth on him, he lets out a masculine groan and tightens his grip on me, pulling me back against him as he nuzzles his face against my neck.

"Morning, *ptichka*." His voice is still thick with sleep and sexy as hell. The hard length of him presses against my bare ass, reminding me of everything that happened last night, or at least everything I can remember.

"It's definitely not morning. What happened? Did I really pass out?"

He gives a soft laugh. "You bet your sweet ass you did." His lips find my neck, kissing a line along my skin that has my body quickly coming back to life.

"So you just kept going?"

I can't help but smile at the sound of his deep laugh. "Fuck yes I did." He brings one hand to my neck before slowly sliding down to cup one of my breasts. "Every part of you is mine, and when I saw you pass out, god," he says, giving a soft laugh, "it was so fucking sexy. It didn't take me long at all." The pad of one finger runs along my nipple. "Even though you were unconscious, when I came inside you, your little pussy gripped me so fucking tightly."

I let out a gasp when he gives my nipple a soft pinch before rolling it between his fingers.

"I hope you learned a valuable lesson, sweetheart," he murmurs against the shell of my ear.

"And what lesson would that be?"

He grabs my thigh and lifts it, positioning the head of his cock against my slit before slowly sliding in. I let out a moan and clutch his forearm as he whispers in my ear.

"That I always follow through with what I say I'm going to do." He gives me another slow thrust. "That I know your body better than you do, and I can make it do whatever the fuck I want." With the next thrust he brings a hand between my legs and starts to rub my clit. "And that I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone, and even when

you're unconscious, I will always take care of you, and you will always be safe with me."

With his fingers working me and his thick cock spreading me wide with each thrust, it doesn't take me long at all. I come with his name on my tongue and when he follows me with a deep groan, I know what it feels like to come home, because Vitaly is my home. He's where I was always meant to be, and I'm never letting him go.

Keeping himself inside me, he kisses me slowly while I stay cocooned in his arms. Cupping his face, I smile against his lips.

"What are you smiling about?"

I run my fingers through the stubble on his cheeks. "I'm happy, and it's not something I ever thought I would be."

He gives me the sweetest smile before kissing me again. "I thought marriage would feel like a prison sentence, but you've proven me so wrong, *ptichka*. I had no idea it could be this good, and I know it's only like this because of you."

Even though a part of me is afraid of the answer, I have to ask anyway. "Are you sure it's because of me? Do you think you could've been happy with any of those other women?"

He smiles and kisses me again. "Baby, I couldn't even tolerate seeing any of them more than once, and the thought of being married to anyone other than you makes me feel sick. You've ruined me for anyone else, so you'd better not ever try and leave me."

"What would you do if I did?" I ask the question knowing there's no way in hell I'd ever willingly walk away from Vitaly.

I swear his whiskey-brown eyes turn a shade darker when he cups my face and gives my bottom lip a warning bite. He's so close I can feel his lips move against mine when he says, "I'd spank your ass red for even thinking it, and then I'd get on my knees and worship every inch of you, reminding you that you're my entire world and that I can't fucking breathe without you."

My breath catches at his words, and I feel him smile.

"Do you want to leave me, *ptichka*? Does my sweet little bird want to fly away?"

He's quickly growing hard inside me, and when I give a soft moan, he lets out a sexy laugh.

“Hard to fly away when you’re trapped on my cock, sweetheart. I guess I should always keep you like this.”

“Fuck,” I gasp when he starts moving his hips.

“Whatever my wife wants.”

I catch a glimpse of his sexy smirk before he kisses me hard. He doesn’t go easy on me. With every hard thrust, he’s reminding me of who I belong to.

“Still thinking about leaving?” His voice is thick with lust as his fingers squeeze my clit in the way that never fails to send me over the edge. “What’s that, baby? I can’t hear you.”

I let out a frustrated groan at his taunt, but it just makes him laugh and fuck me harder.

“No,” I finally manage to pant. “You know I’d never leave you.” I run my tongue along his and rock my hips back against him. “I love you too damn much.”

“I love you too damn much, too, baby,” he growls before giving me what I need. The orgasm consumes me and right before I come down, he slams into me, locking us in place as his cock pulses inside me.

“Goddamn,” he groans, both of us completely spent and quickly falling back asleep. Before I drift off, he whispers “I love you” in my ear and wraps his arms even tighter around me, making sure I’m covered and that my neck isn’t at an awkward angle.

I fall asleep feeling so loved and at peace, so when the nightmare jolts me awake, I’m completely unprepared for it. In the dream I’d been taken from Vitaly and forced to live with my brothers again. His dark-haired pet was begging me to help her, but I couldn’t do anything. I was paralyzed with fear and frozen in place, wanting so desperately to get back to Vitaly because I knew he’d make everything better, that I’d be safe if I could just get back to him.

Not wanting to wake him, I slide out from under his arm, and scoot off the bed. The sun is just starting to rise, giving me enough light to see his gorgeous face. He looks so damn peaceful, and I’m not about to interrupt that because I had a nightmare. I do need to purge myself of the images and the oppressive feeling that’s still lingering in my mind, though. Grabbing his shirt from the floor, I slip it on and dig out my smaller sketchpad from my bag in the closet. With my pencils in hand, I sit on the floor near one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and find my next blank page.

I lose myself in what I'm doing. Everything else fades away except the black lines I'm creating on the page. All I can think about is how badly I need to get this shit out of my mind and onto the paper. I draw Konstantin's pet again and again, trying to capture the way she'd looked in my dream, and it's not until I hear Vitaly yelling my name that I finally drop my pencil like I've just come out of a trance. I turn my head, and the look of pure horror on his pale face scares the fuck out of me.

"What's wrong?" I quickly jump up, noticing the charcoal smudges I've put on his nice, white dress shirt. "I'm so sorry."

I try to brush it clean, but it just makes it worse, and his shocked, pale face is still scaring the fuck out of me. Finally, he grabs my hands to still them and then nods towards my sketchpad. It opened to a new page when I jumped up, the one where Konstantin's pet is being dragged off the plane by a leash.

"Why are you?" He starts and then stops, letting out a shaky breath.
"Why the fuck are you drawing her?"

"I had a nightmare," I whisper. "Drawing helps me get it all out. If I don't, it makes me feel like I'm going crazy."

"But you're drawing Alina. How the fuck do you know Alina?"

"What?" I look down at the dark-haired woman with the haunted eyes. I don't have my colored pencils out, so I wasn't able to capture the vivid blue-green of them, but I've managed to recreate the shape and the pain that's always shining through.

"I don't understand," I finally whisper.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Vitaly says, reaching for the sketchpad, and the pain in his voice has me quickly grabbing onto him. He falls to his knees, and I go down with him, wrapping my arms around him as I try to comfort him in any way that I can. He looks utterly distraught, like a man who's coming face to face with his worst fears. He lets out a pained groan when he flips through my sketchpad, seeing her naked, beaten body.

"This is Alina, the woman we've been looking for. She's Konstantin's pet?" His eyes meet mine, and the sight of them makes my own fill with tears. There's pain and confusion and so much heartache, and it guts me to see him like this. "I don't understand. Why didn't you tell me you knew where she was?"

"I didn't know it was her." I point to the drawing in his hands. "She's Konstantin's pet. I never knew her name. I only ever catch glimpses of her.

I'm not allowed to talk to her or acknowledge she even exists." I grab the sketchpad and turn to the beginning, to the drawings I made of the woman I'd tried to help, the one Konstantin had beaten to death in front of me. "I told you that if I try to help them, it only puts them in more danger."

He's silent as he flips through the pages, studying each and every one of them, stopping when he gets to the part that's filled with his face. He meets my eyes, and the pain in his fades the tiniest bit at knowing I've been secretly drawing him, but it quickly comes back as he closes the sketchpad and lets it fall to the floor. He scrubs a hand over his face and then shakes his head as if he still can't get himself to believe it.

"She's been with him this whole time?"

"I think so. I first saw her almost two years ago, and Konstantin isn't the type to want someone else's used pet. That's not how he does things."

"Where is she now?"

I rest my hand on his forearm and meet his eyes. "She's here, Vitaly. She was on the plane with us."

His eyes widen. "She's here? She was at the mansion at the same fucking time we were?"

"Yes."

He stands and starts pacing the room, too pissed off to stand still.

"I can't fucking believe it," he yells and then thinks better of it and lowers his voice, but it doesn't stop the rage from coming through. "We sat there and ate supper with that motherfucker and the whole goddamn time Alina was right fucking there!"

There's nothing I can say to make this better, so I don't say anything. I cross my arms over my chest and watch the man I love almost fall apart from grief and anger and hate, and there's not a goddamn thing I can do to take it away. This is my brother's fault, but it's also mine. I should've done something to help her. I should've found a fucking way. As soon as I start to think it, Vitaly stops his pacing and walks over to me. He cups my face and leans down so I have no choice but to face him. I'm too ashamed to meet his eyes, so I look to the side, ignoring the tears that continue to fall.

"Look at me, *ptichka*." His voice is soft and calmer than it was just a few seconds ago. It's the tender voice I've only ever heard him use with me. I force my eyes to his, expecting to see disgust, but there's only love and sadness in them.

“This is not your fault.” His thumb grazes my cheek, wiping away the tears. “Do you understand me?”

“It is, though. I should’ve tried harder.”

He gives a soft shake of his head. “No, baby. If you had, then he would’ve killed her, and he probably would’ve made you do it.”

I shudder at the image, and when he feels it, he lets me go just long enough to wrap his arms around me and pull me into a hug. He cocoons me with the warmth of his body as he strokes my hair and kisses the top of my head.

“We’re going to get Alina back because of you. If you hadn’t drawn her, then who knows how long it would’ve taken us to realize she’s his pet. We would’ve eventually found her, but it’s just been sped up because of you.”

He sighs and kisses me again.

“He’s broken her, but she’s still alive, and that’s the most important thing. We can get her the help she needs when we get her back. Matvey will spend the rest of his life making sure she’s safe and taken care of. We just need to get her home.”

He keeps holding me for several more minutes, lost in his own misery, imagining all the horrible things that I unfortunately know for a fact have been done to Roman’s sister. Even in his own pain, he keeps stroking my hair and kissing my head, reminding me again and again that I’m safe with him and that he’ll always make damn sure I stay that way.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper against his chest.

“You have nothing to apologize for, baby.”

“Your brothers are going to hate me.” I tighten my arms around his waist as my body starts to shake. “Matvey will never forgive me, and how will I ever face Alina?”

“My brothers could never hate you, and Matvey would only be angry if you did something to put Alina’s life in danger, and you didn’t, *ptichka*. You did everything you knew how to do to keep her safe. No one blames you for this, and as far as Alina goes, I’m guessing she knows better than anyone what a monster your brother can be. She’ll understand why you didn’t say anything, baby.”

I nod against his chest while he keeps me wrapped in a tight hug. He waits until he’s sure I’m okay before he gives a deep sigh and says, “I need to tell my brothers about this.”

“How do you think Matvey is going to take the news?”

He grabs his phone from the nightstand and shakes his head. “No way in fuck am I telling him right now. I’ll tell the others first.”

I watch him send a few texts before tossing his phone on the bed and throwing on a pair of jeans.

“Here, baby, put these on.” He hands me my pajama pants, and then steps closer, buttoning the most likely ruined white shirt that I’m still wearing.

“I’m really sorry I ruined this.”

He gives me a soft smile and drags the back of his knuckles along my check. “Baby, you can ruin every damn shirt I own. I don’t give a fuck about anything but you.”

When he’s satisfied I’m covered up enough, he kisses my forehead right as there’s a soft knock at our door. Keeping my hand in his, he walks with me across the room. As soon as the door is opened, Lev and Danil walk in. Lev looks around, and his worried look makes it obvious that he’s expecting something bad. When everything looks to be in place, he runs his eyes over me and Vitaly. Obviously confused, he scrubs a hand over his mouth, giving his lip ring a soft tug before crossing his arms over his chest.

“What the fuck’s going on?” he finally asks.

Danil gives me a smile and shuts the door as Vitaly motions for them to come further in. He watches Vitaly, a worried look on his face as he sits in one of the chairs and waits to see what the hell is going on.

“Seriously,” Lev says, too antsy to sit. “What the fuck is going on? Why aren’t Roman and Matvey here?” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair before resting his light blue eyes on mine. Whatever he sees has his face paling. He shakes his head and starts to pace. Pointing a finger at Vitaly while his feet keep moving, he says, “Don’t you fucking say it.”

The pain in his voice has me quickly shaking my head. “No, it’s not what you think. Well, not really anyway.”

Vitaly squeezes my hand in an *it’s okay, baby* kind of way, reminding me yet again how damn grateful I am to have him, to have someone I can count on, someone who will always support me and have my back. I return the squeeze before he reaches down and grabs my sketchbook.

“She’s alive,” he tells them.

Danil jumps up, both he and Lev asking questions at once until Vitaly holds up a hand and says, “I can’t fucking answer everything at once. Just hang on and I’ll tell you.”

When Lev and Danil quiet down, Vitaly sighs and holds the sketchpad out to them. “You might not want to see this, but Alina is Konstantin’s pet. Katya had no idea it was Alina. No one ever calls her by her name.”

Danil takes the pad and starts flipping through it. Both men pale at the images covering every single page.

“Fucking hell,” Lev groans, turning away when he gets to the picture where Alina is naked and chained under the table, a plate of food just out of reach.

Danil lifts his eyes to mine. “Why did you draw this?”

“I have a lot of nightmares, and drawing the things I see helps me get them out of my head.”

He nods like he understands the urge to clear my mind of unsavory things and hands the sketchpad back to me. When I grab it, he keeps his hands on it for a second, waiting until I meet his eyes again.

“Don’t let Matvey see this until after we get her back. It’ll drive him insane.”

“I won’t.” I take the sketchpad when he releases it and bury it back at the bottom of my backpack in the closet.

“I don’t understand,” Lev says. “She’s been his pet the whole time?”

“Yes,” I tell him, coming back to stand by Vitaly.

“Where is she now?” Lev looks from me to Vitaly. He clenches his hand and then shakes it loose, reminding me that he’s a dangerous underground fighter and probably seconds away from losing his shit. Vitaly wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me against him, reminding me that I’m safe and making every fear instantly vanish.

“She’s here,” Vitaly says, “at his mansion.”

Lev shakes his head, pissed off and refusing to believe what he’s just heard.

“She was there while we ate supper?” Danil asks.

“She was,” Vitaly confirms, and then he tells them everything. He explains what happened to me when I was young and why I can’t do anything to help the women I see, and by the time he’s finished, his brothers look just like he had—disgusted and distraught and filled with an anger that’s threatening to consume them. I have no idea what Vitaly has planned, but I know that if he’s not careful, this is going to blow up and end up being completely out of anyone’s control.

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Chapter 12

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Vitaly

Lev and Danil look like they're seconds away from storming out of the penthouse and going straight over to Konstantin's house and killing every Lebedev fucker they can, and this reaction is nothing compared to what Roman and Matvey are going to want to do. If I can't get these two to calm down, then I don't stand a chance with the other two.

"We can't do anything right now," I remind them.

"I can think of lots of things we can do right fucking now," Lev mutters, starting to pace again.

"Yeah, lots of things that will just end up putting Alina in danger." I look to Danil for help.

He sighs and looks over at Lev. "He's right. We need a fucking plan."

I smile, because I knew Danil's need for planning and order would win in the end, or at least I hoped like hell it would.

"Yeah, yeah," Lev groans. "Everything needs a fucking plan."

Danil shrugs. "It's true."

"You didn't have a fucking plan when you jumped out of the SUV and faced off with Dominic the night he was following us," Lev reminds him.

"Yeah, and that could've easily gone a very different way, and you know it." Danil says. "I never would've chosen to handle things like that if I'd had a choice."

Lev scowls but relents with a sigh. "Fuck, I know, brother." He looks between me and Danil. "Matvey is going to lose it when he finds out, and Roman's not going to be much better."

"I know. That's why I told you two alone. I'm going to need your help because I think it's going to take all three of us to keep them from running

out of here and straight to Konstantin and Osip.”

“I’m still not convinced the three of us will be able to stop them,” Lev says.

Danil sits back down. “Maybe a pregnant wife will help, at least with Roman. He would never do anything to put her at risk.”

“True,” I say, already grabbing my phone. We have a big group chat with all of us in it, but this one has to be private. Finding Emily’s number, I quickly type out *Think you can waddle your way up to our room without anyone noticing? It’s important. Don’t tell Roman.*

Her response is immediate and exactly what I was expecting. *I don’t fucking waddle! Yeah, he’s in the shower. I’m on my way. Give me a few minutes. Not because I’m waddling, smartass, but because I need to take it easy on the stairs.*

She ends it with the smiling emoji because my sister-in-law can never stay mad at me. I send her the pregnant woman emoji, and then because I can’t help it, I also add in the duck emoji, because the woman fucking waddles now.

“You’re terrible,” Katya says, looking over my shoulder at the emojis I sent.

I lean down and kiss her cheek before whispering near her ear, “You’re going to look fucking adorable when you waddle, baby.”

Kissing her ear, I pull back and smile at the blush spreading up her cheeks. Yeah, my baby is going to look cute as hell when she’s pregnant. When I stand back up, both my brothers are looking at me. Danil is fighting a smile while Lev makes no attempt to hide his. His pierced brow is raised, adding to the already smug look on his face. Every part of him is screaming *I told you so*, but instead of irritating me, it just makes me laugh.

We all know what’s at stake with Alina, and the weight of what she’s going through is hanging heavy on all of us, so the smiles and laughs aren’t because we don’t care. They’re because we do fucking care. We care so goddamn much that if we didn’t have these moments of happiness, we’d all go fucking insane. The last couple of years have taught us to embrace every second of happiness we can find, because that shit is fleeting. It can all disappear in the blink of an eye, and none of us will ever make the mistake of taking someone we love for granted again.

The soft knock at the door pulls my attention away from Katya’s blushing face and my brothers’ smug grins.

“Come in,” I say loud enough for Emily to hear.

She walks in with a hand on her lower back and a very distinct pregnant waddle that I’m kind enough to not point out. I do raise a brow and laugh, though, which earns me a scowl that doesn’t even come close to looking angry and a soft shake of her head.

“Stop making fun of me.” She smiles at Katya. “Your husband is an ass.”

“Don’t I know it,” she says, earning her a smack on the ass and a kiss to the tip of her cute nose.

Emily takes the seat Danil offers her, sinking into it with a grateful sigh. “Okay, so what’s with all this cloak-and-dagger shit?”

I look at Lev and Danil. “What the fuck does that mean?” They both shrug, so I switch to English and ask Emily, “What the fuck does that mean? Your English phrases make no sense to me sometimes.”

Emily smiles and leans back in the chair, making herself comfortable, or as comfortable as she can with a large pregnant belly. “Spy stuff, secretive, sneaking around spy stuff. You might want to hurry, too, because as soon as Roman gets out of the shower and realizes I’m not in the bedroom, he’s going to come looking for me.”

She’s right, of course. As soon as he can’t find her, he’s going to search the place top to bottom.

I reach a hand out and gesture to her belly. “If I tell you something shocking, you’re not going to go into labor, right? Because Roman will fucking kill me if you go into early labor because of me.”

Emily pats her belly and gives me a reassuring smile. “I promise to not go into early labor. Now, tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Your baby’s going to have a potty mouth,” I warn her.

“Oh please. This little guy is going to be cussing like a sailor by the time he’s five if his crazy uncles have anything to say about it.”

“We would never. As soon as the babies start coming, it’s going to be nothing but shoots and darn-its.” I look to Lev and Danil for confirmation.

“I’ll probably stick with holy crap,” Lev says.

“I’m partial to butthole,” Danil says.

“I bet you are,” I say, unable to help it.

Emily points a finger at me with a big smile on her face. “Stop trying to make me laugh. Seriously, what’s going on?”

I don't grab the sketchpad this time, because there's no way in hell I'm showing Emily those drawings. She may say she won't go into early labor, but I'm not about to take that risk. What I'm about to tell her is bad enough.

"Okay," I start, pulling Katya tighter against me because her presence is soothing, and I'm not afraid to embrace that, "we recently learned something about Alina, and we need your help to keep Roman from doing something crazy."

"What about Matvey?" she quickly asks. I can hear the worry in her tone. She cares about him like a brother, she cares for all of us like that, so I'm not at all surprised to see her instantly worry about him.

"We'll deal with Matvey," Lev tells her, "and Roman won't do anything crazy as long as you're here when we tell him."

"Tell him what exactly?"

I'm about to start explaining everything when Katya surprises me by speaking first. "I've never seen Alina, so I had no idea what she looked like, but we kind of just figured out that she's Konstantin's pet. She's alive," she quickly adds, "but I'm not going to lie to you and say she's being treated well."

Emily grips her belly tighter and her face goes paler than I'd like.

"Emily?" I ask, stepping forward in case I need to rush her to the hospital. "You okay?"

"I'm okay." She gives my hand a soft squeeze. "Don't worry. I'm not having this baby just yet."

"Thank fuck," I say, making her smile.

"I'm so happy she's alive. I just feel horrible for her. I can't imagine what she's going through." She looks up at us. "So she's here now? She's at their mansion?"

"Yeah," I tell her.

"And you want me to make sure Roman doesn't run out of here and try to rescue her without a plan?"

"Yeah," I say again.

"I'm assuming you all are going to make a plan and kill those fuckers, right?" She glances at Katya. "Sorry. I know they're your brothers."

"Don't be sorry. I'd pull the trigger myself if Vitaly would let me."

I smile down at my wife and kiss the tip of her nose. "Not a chance in hell, baby, but I love that you'd want to."

“My dad’s a real jackass,” Emily says, “so I completely understand your desire to shoot a family member.” She rolls her eyes and adds, “Roman won’t let me pull the trigger either.”

I run my eyes over her pregnant body. “Yeah, can’t imagine why not.”

“Well I’m not pregnant and you won’t let me shoot anybody,” Katya says.

I give her a wink and lightly tap the ass I’ll never be able to get enough of. “Keep telling yourself that, *ptichka*.”

She smiles up at me, and I fucking melt for my wife. God, how the hell I went from ruthless Bratva killer to whipped man in love so damn quickly I’ll never know.

“Emily!”

We all look to the door at the sound of Roman’s worried voice. Emily immediately calls to him to let him know she’s okay.

“Here we go,” Danil mutters. “Want me to get Matvey so we don’t have to do this twice?”

“Yeah, once is going to be bad enough,” I say.

Lev nods his agreement and then goes to get his wife while Danil goes in search of Matvey and Simona. Might as well get everyone in here for this.

“What’s going on?” Roman’s eyes immediately run over his wife, searching for any signs of distress.

“I’m fine, babe,” she tells him, reaching a hand out for him and then standing so she can sit on his lap. When she gives me a quick smile, I know she’s also done it to try and secure his ass in place. He won’t jump up if she’s in his lap. He’d never do anything to risk hurting his wife or son. She wraps an arm around his shoulders and leans into him while he kisses her cheek and rests a protective hand on her belly.

A few minutes later the others walk in. Lev and Danil keep their wives close while Matvey scans the room, opting to stand off to the side, leaning against the wall. His hood is down, but his arms are crossed over his chest, and he already looks wary. His dark eyes meet mine, and I have to force myself to hold his gaze. This is going to fucking kill him, and I wish like hell I could take this from him, but I can’t. We’re in this together to the end, and if that means we walk through hell together, then so fucking be it.

“Tell me,” he says, and the pain in his gravelly voice makes it clear he already knows something is up. When I don’t immediately speak, he adds,

“Just fucking tell me.”

“She’s alive.” I quickly spit the words out, knowing that’s what he fears most, and when he hears it, his shoulders slump in relief, but the pain doesn’t leave his eyes. “She’s alive,” I repeat because I know it’s what he needs to hold onto right now. “And we know where she is.”

He pushes off from the wall and takes a step closer. “What?” He looks at all of us. “Where the fuck is she?”

“Matvey,” Lev says, trying to calm him down. “We’re going to get her, brother, but we can’t do it without a plan.”

Matvey turns his eyes back to mine. “Where the fuck is she?”

“I’ll tell you, but first I need to know you’re not going to run off and do anything stupid. We can’t fuck this up. I know you know that, but you’re not thinking clearly right now.” He ignores everything I’ve just said and shakes his head at me.

“Where the fuck is she, Vitaly?”

I can’t ignore the raw pain in his voice. I can’t fucking do it to him, so I say, “She’s Konstantin’s pet.”

He flinches like I’ve just sucker-punched him. “What?” He looks from me to Katya. “She’s with your brother? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“She didn’t know,” I tell him. “She had no idea what Alina looked like.”

“Then how’d you figure it out?”

I don’t want to answer his question, but I know he’s not going to leave it alone until he hears it all, so I tell him about Katya’s nightmares and about her drawings and how I woke up and saw them.

“I want to see them.” His eyes dart around the room, searching for the sketchpad before meeting mine again. “Let me fucking see them.”

“I can’t do that, brother.”

“Vitaly, let me fucking see them.” He runs a hand through his hair and shakes his head in anger and frustration. “I have to know what’s happening to her. Let me fucking see them!”

“I promise I’ll show you after we get her back.” I force myself to meet his eyes again. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

He paces the room, the anger coming off him is so fucking palpable we all feel it. I look at Roman. He’s been silent throughout all this, but his eyes are just as haunted as Matvey’s right now. Emily’s hugging him and whispering something into his ear, and I swear her voice is the only thing keeping him sane right now.

When he looks up at me, he asks, “She’s at his mansion, isn’t she? She was there this whole fucking time? The bastard had us over for supper while my sister was locked in one of his goddamn rooms?”

“Yes,” Katya answers before I can, “but he has no idea she’s your sister.”

“How do you know that?” Roman looks around the room. “What if he knows and he’s just fucking with us?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Danil says. “He’s already united our families, and now we’re working together. Once everything is set up, he could use Alina to ruin us and take over the whole damn thing.”

“He doesn’t know,” Katya says again. “I know my brothers. No way in hell could they resist bragging about something like this. They don’t involve me in their business, but they’ll make little comments in front of me about people they’re planning on fucking over or killing. They’re ruthless and smart, but they’re also full of themselves and never miss an opportunity to try and make themselves look smarter or tougher than someone else.”

“We need to talk to Dominic and figure out how we’re going to do this,” Danil says, trying to steer us back to planning mode. “I’m still waiting for Konstantin to set up a meeting between me and Casimir, and once I have access to all that, I should be able to go in and disable his security and find out who bought Dominic’s sister.”

“And then we go in and kill them all and get Alina,” Lev says.

Matvey nods, but I can tell he’s still fighting the urge to go and get her right fucking now. We’re all keeping an eye on him, and when he starts to walk out the door, I run over to him and block his exit.

“Get out of the way,” he says, looking more pissed off by the second.

“I can’t let you do something that you’ll regret.” I hold up my hands, because the last thing I want to do is grab him and make him even angrier. “You will never forgive yourself if you run out there and do something that ends up getting Alina killed. She’s alive, Matvey, and she’s going to stay that way.”

“How the fuck do you know that?” he yells. “You won’t even let me see the drawings your wife did of her, which tells me they’re really fucking bad, and you expect me to believe that he might not decide to kill her?”

“He won’t,” Katya tries to tell him.

“How can you know that?” He turns to her, and as angry as he is, I’m not even slightly worried that he’s going to do something to hurt her.

Matvey might be enraged right now, but he's my brother, and I know what he's capable of and what he's not capable of and hitting my wife is not something he would ever do.

Katya hesitates, and I can tell she doesn't want to tell him what she's about to say, but when she looks to me, I give her a nod, letting her know it's okay. She looks back at Matvey and says, "Because he's broken her. She won't fight back, and that pleases him enough to keep her alive. Plus, he has an entire staff of new women he's tormenting. It will keep him occupied and hopefully away from her for a few days."

The pained groan Matvey gives at hearing how broken Alina is makes my goddamn chest ache. When he turns his dark eyes to mine, they're glassy and this time when he tries to walk by, I let him. I watch as he heads into the gym, and a few seconds later all I can hear is the sound of fists hitting the punching bag.

"I'll take the first round," Lev says, kissing Jolene before heading to the gym. We'll all take turns watching over him until it's time for us to go and get her.

"You okay?" I ask Roman. He's still sitting with Emily on his lap, looking like he's still trying to wrap his head around all this.

"Not really, but I will be when we get her back and kill them." He looks up at me. "How bad is the sketchpad?"

"Bad," I say.

"I'd like to see it."

Before I can tell him no, he pats Emily's stomach and gives her a small smile. "You know I'd never do anything that would cause my wife to worry. I'm not going to run off and try to take them down all by myself, but I need to see what's been done to her. We all need to see it so we can better understand how to help her heal from all this shit. I don't want to do something once we get her back that might trigger her in some way. I'd never fucking forgive myself, and I'm sure as hell not going to demand she talk to me about it." He sighs and scrubs a hand over his jaw. "I just don't want to do anything to make it worse for her."

I nod and go into the closet to get the sketchpad. Handing it to him without a word, I sit down in the chair opposite him and pull Katya onto my lap, wanting and needing her close. She softens against me, sliding her arm behind my neck so she can run her fingers through the back of my hair. Everything about her comforts me, and she somehow always knows exactly

what I need. I rest my hand on her thigh and give it a soft squeeze, letting her know how much I appreciate it.

“Jesus Christ,” Roman growls, slamming the book shut and handing it to me, not even wanting to touch the damn thing anymore. Emily’s crying quietly but trying like hell to hide it and Roman looks like a part of himself just died, and I guess it probably has. We all knew Alina was going through hell, but now we have the proof of it, and I think we all secretly held out hope that maybe she was being treated okay, that maybe the bastard who bought her wasn’t quite the monster we were envisioning, but now there’s no hope. We can’t pretend we didn’t just see the truth of what she’s going through, and in many ways it’s worse than we imagined.

Roman comforts Emily while Katya jumps up to hide the book again. None of us want to risk Matvey seeing it. He can see it when Alina is in front of him, alive and safe. To give it to him now would just be cruel. As soon as Katya comes back, I pull her onto my lap again.

“Was there nothing you could do for her?” Roman asks Katya. His tone isn’t accusing. He’s just trying to understand what’s going on like the rest of us.

I tighten my grip on my wife and meet Roman’s eyes. “Katya did everything she could for Alina. The only way to keep her safe was to ignore her.” I briefly explain what happened when Katya was twelve, which causes Roman to go even paler and Emily to start crying again.

“He’s a fucking monster,” Jolene mutters from where she’s sitting on the end of the bed.

“They both are,” Katya agrees.

“Thank you for doing everything you could to not make things worse for my sister,” Roman says. “I know it couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Katya quickly says. “I haven’t had to endure anything like what Alina’s been going through.”

“You’re still a victim to your sadistic brothers,” he tells her, repeating what I’ve already been telling her. “It may not be the same, but you’re a victim nonetheless, and none of us blame you for this.”

Katya nods at him, and I can tell she’s trying not to cry. I pull her closer and give her a kiss. “You’re a part of this family now, *ptichka*. You’re one of us, baby.”

She gives me a wobbly smile and rests her forehead against mine. I hold her while the others eventually get up and leave. Everything is about to

change. Once we get with Dominic and Danil has the information he needs, we're going to take on one of the world's most powerful Bratvas. There's no guarantee we're all going to come out of this alive. The thought of dying hasn't ever really bothered me before. I didn't give it much thought. I obviously never wanted it, but I also just figured I'd be here one minute and gone the next and who the fuck would really care beyond my brothers? With Katya's small breaths hitting my lips, I'm fully aware that everything has changed.

If something happens to me, then she'll be left alone, possibly pregnant with our baby. The reality hits me hard, and I know I'll never get any peace until I get this all sorted out. Cupping her face, I kiss her, taking my time and savoring the taste and feel of her against my lips. God, I could spend the rest of my life kissing this woman and never get tired of it. When I pull back, I smile at the pouty look she gives me.

"I'll give you everything you need later, baby. I promise. I need to talk to Danil about something, though."

"Okay." She yawns, reminding me that she didn't get near enough sleep last night because I wore her ass out and she had a nightmare.

Picking her up, I carry her back to bed. "Try and take a nap. I'll be back up in a little bit to check on you."

"Are you sure you don't need me?"

I smile and kiss her forehead. "I always need you, *ptichka*, but I'll be okay for a little bit, and you need to rest."

Her eyes are already drifting closed before I've even left the bedroom. Walking past the gym, I see Matvey still hitting the bag while Lev gives me a nod from where he's sitting in the corner, watching over our brother to make sure he's okay and doesn't try to escape the penthouse.

Making my way downstairs, I knock on Danil and Simona's door. When no one answers, I try the next door, the one that leads to the soundproofed room Danil had made so his wife could play the piano without feeling embarrassed. We all know that's not the only reason he had it made, and I can't help but envy their nice, private space. I'm thinking about how big of a pain in the ass it would be to soundproof our bedroom when Danil opens the door.

"Am I interrupting anything naughty?" I ask, trying to look past him. "Is your wife getting another spanking?" I raise my voice and add, "Have you been bad again, Simona?"

Danil laughs and steps aside, showing me the empty room. “She’s upstairs with Emily.”

“It’s for the best, I guess. It’s not like you can spank your pregnant wife.”

“Not hard anyway.”

I laugh at the sad tone of his voice and walk over to the desk he has set up in the corner for himself. “I need your help with something.”

He sits in his chair and looks up at me. “What?”

“Well, it occurred to me that shit might go very badly at Konstantin’s, and I’d rather not worry about whether or not Katya will be taken care of, so I want to make sure that her name is on all of my bank accounts and that she’ll get everything if something happens to me.”

Danil’s already typing by the time I’m finished. His fingers fly over the keyboard, doing who the fuck knows what. I’ve long given up trying to understand his computer genius mind. I was baffled by it when I was fifteen and he started hacking and stealing us money, and I’m just as mystified at twenty-seven.

“Done,” he says, still typing, “and I’ve added in a will that states Katya is the sole beneficiary just for added protection.” His fingers still as he looks up at me. “You know we’d always take care of her, right?”

“Yeah, I know. I just feel better having this in place.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m also going to set her up a personal savings account and put a million in it. She’ll be taken care of, so stop worrying.” He looks up at me after he’s finished doing everything. “Your ass is going to be fine, so enough with the morbid shit. We’re getting Alina, and we’re all walking out of there together.”

I smile and smack his shoulder. “My ass is always fine, brother.”

“It’s nice to see that marriage has humbled you.”

I laugh and head for the door. “If anything it’s made me even more full of myself,” I admit. “Katya can’t keep her fucking hands off me. It’s going straight to my head, brother.”

“Yeah, I fucking bet it is,” he mutters, making me laugh even harder as I leave the room.

On the way back upstairs, Roman hollers at me, letting me know that Dominic will be coming over tomorrow to meet with us. It’s the first time we’ve invited him into our home, but we’re no longer apprehensive about letting him in. Our relationship with the heir to the Alessi family isn’t one

we ever saw coming, but we've all grown to like the cocky bastard, and we've developed a mutual trust. His father isn't too thrilled about it, but Dominic is pretty much in charge of the family now, even if it's not official.

While Katya naps, I let Lev know I can watch Matvey tonight. I don't know what kind of weird-ass sleeping arrangement Lev and Jolene have, but I know that it requires them both to be together. I've pestered him enough to know that it has something to do with some part of him being inside some part of her. The obvious guess is his dick, but I don't know how in the fuck she can fall asleep like that. I prefer a soft mattress and a down pillow. Jolene apparently prefers a giant pierced cock shoved up inside her. To each his own, I guess. I see the appeal from Lev's point of view, though, and the idea of falling asleep buried inside Katya is something I'm going to need to try very soon.

We spend the rest of the day at the penthouse. I make a few calls to Pink to make sure everything is running like it should, I fuck my wife until we're both breathless and completely spent, and then we eat supper with everyone else. When it starts getting late, I kiss Katya goodnight and then head with Matvey down to the gaming room. He knows we're watching over him, and I know he hates it, but he accepts it and doesn't argue. Instead, he grabs two pool cues and hands me one without a word. The man is a fucking master at pool, so I have no hope of winning against him, but I don't care. We play in silence, and he kicks my ass again and again.

"You'd think with all the games we've played over the years that you'd start to get somewhat good at this," he finally says.

"Yeah, you'd think," I agree. "I think it's the thin stick. I'm used to something much bigger in my hands."

He doesn't laugh, but the corner of his mouth does quirk up a tiny bit when he says, "Yeah, I'm sure that's the problem."

"It's the only logical explanation. I naturally excel at most things. If we were using girthier sticks, I'd be a fucking master at this."

"Well, at least the balls are the right size," he deadpans, making me laugh.

"You got that right, brother."

He finishes kicking my ass before we switch to the couch. We play a few video games before finally settling on some action movie with enough explosions and gunfire to keep me awake. It's not long before I hear Matvey's soft snores. He's pulled his hood up and positioned himself so

he's sprawled at the end of the couch, using one of the cushions for a pillow. I keep an eye on him, feeling my bladder growing bigger with each passing minute. I keep looking for signs that he's waking up, but it's the same even snores and heavy, slow breathing. After forty-five minutes, I can't wait any damn longer. Being careful to not wake him, I sneak out of the room and race down the hall to the bathroom.

"Goddamn," I mutter, sighing in pure relief when I can finally take a piss. Feeling like I can breathe again, I walk back into the game room just to have the air knocked right back out of me. The couch is empty, and Matvey is nowhere to be found.

"Fuck!" I yell, running right back out the door and calling for Danil. His room is just a few doors down, and when he hears me, he comes running out.

"What?" he asks, looking around to see what the hell I'm yelling about.
"Matvey's gone. I had to take a fucking piss."

He runs back in to grab his laptop and comes rushing back out. Pulling up the security cameras, we both lean in close, watching the screen that shows Matvey riding the elevator down before running to his Camaro and driving off.

"Fucking hell," I holler, running back up the stairs to get Roman and Lev. I knock on their doors as quietly as I can, not wanting to wake their wives if I don't have to, and when they both come out, I tell them what happened.

"How the hell did that happen?" Lev asks while throwing a T-shirt and jeans on before handing me one of his guns. I take it and the extra clip that's sitting on the counter.

"It happened because the fucker pretended to be asleep for forty-five-fucking minutes," I yell. "He even fake snored, like the whole fucking time. Who the fuck does that?"

"Matvey, apparently," Danil says, pulling on a pair of shoes while studying his computer. "I can track his car through the CCTV cameras. He's not that far ahead of us. He just turned onto Fifth."

Roman looks between us. "Fuck, do you think he's going to the mansion?"

"I don't know yet." Danil looks at his watch. "Sergei and the others will be here in two minutes."

I'm not at all surprised that Danil's already made the phone call and determined exactly how long it will take them to get here. I debate running up to kiss Katya goodbye, but there's no time. I don't want to wake her just so she'll sit up worrying, so I resist the urge and follow my brothers into the elevator.

"He didn't take the interstate," Danil says, giving us an update. "I think he's headed to where the auctions are held."

"I hope he had enough sense to bring a fucking mask. No way in hell they don't have security cameras set up. He might as well look up and smile at Konstantin as he starts slitting his men's throats," I say right as the doors open and we all step out.

A squeal of tires lets us know the men have arrived, and as soon as they see us, they give a quick nod and race for the elevator to guard our wives while we're gone. Knowing Katya will be safe allows me to put all my focus on Matvey. We pile into the SUV. Lev drives and Danil tells him where to go as Roman checks his gun and I stare out the window, hoping for a glimpse of a black Camaro that's miraculously U-turned and is on its way back home.

Danil pops that bubble when he says, "He's just parked outside the building where they have the auctions. Fuck, I can disable the CCTV footage around the building, but if Konstantin has his own up, it'll be impossible for me to hack into them. Goddammit, Matvey," he mutters as he types faster than I've ever seen him. Simona may be the pianist, but Danil makes his own kind of music on that damn keyboard. "I've tried to put up something that will cause an interference. Hopefully it'll work and the camera images will be too fuzzy for them to see anything if the Lebedevs do have cameras set up. It's the best I can fucking do."

"We're almost there," Lev says, making a left and then a quick right before pulling up alongside the now vacant black Camaro.

We get out and run for the building, looking everywhere for Matvey while trying to not draw attention to ourselves. The front door of the building is busted open, and as soon as we step inside we're greeted with the wet, raspy gasps of someone who's just had his throat slit. We follow the horror movie soundtrack down the hall, slipping into the only room with an open door with our guns drawn, but we could've saved ourselves the trouble, because Matvey's already tied up the five men and is slowly working his way through them.

His wild, dark eyes meet mine. “Sorry, brother,” he says before digging the blade of his knife in deeper to the neck he’s currently slitting.

“I can’t believe you fake snored that long,” I tell him, looking down at the next poor fucker in Matvey’s line. “Forty-five fucking minutes, he did that.” The man doesn’t seem as impressed by it as I was, probably because he’s too busy shitting himself in fear.

“It wasn’t smart to come here,” Danil says, looking around the room for any obvious cameras.

Matvey points a bloody knife at the man who’s still bleeding out at his feet. “Karel was kind enough to shut them off for me in exchange for an easy death.”

I nudge him with my foot, watching the large, gaping wound in his throat part even more with the movement as fresh blood spills out. “That was easy?”

“Fuck yeah it was,” Matvey says, stepping towards the next man who’s trying desperately to yell something past the gag in his mouth. “Wait till you see what I do to the rest of them.”

I look over at Lev, Danil, and Roman. “I mean, we’re already here. We might as well let him finish.”

Danil sighs and looks around at the mess. “What’s a few more bodies to explain? We’re already in a fucking mess.”

“That’s the spirit,” I tell him.

Lev walks over and takes a seat, kicking another out for me. I smile and sit down.

“Well fuck,” Roman mutters. “Save one for me, Matvey.”

“Will do, brother,” he says, already getting to work on the next guy.

“I wish I’d brought popcorn,” I whisper to Lev. “That’s just not something you can carry around easily, though, you know?”

“It’s not,” Lev agrees, watching Matvey start to carve open the man’s chest. “It’s too big to fit in your pockets.”

“So true.” I stretch my legs out and cross my ankles. “And it’d look stupid as hell carting around a bag of popcorn everywhere you go.”

“It would.” Lev gives a soft laugh. “But since when have you given a fuck about how stupid you look?”

I turn to look at him. “I never look stupid.”

“Okay.” He laughs even harder. “You keep telling yourself that. Remember the time you dressed up like a scarecrow for Halloween and you

put hay in your pants?” It takes him a second to finish because he’s laughing too hard to speak. “Yeah, you didn’t look stupid at all with straw sticking out of your ass.”

“It was my first American Halloween,” I say in my own defense, “and I did not have straw *in* my fucking ass. I stuffed it down my pants, and I do not recommend it. It scratched the fuck out of my dick.”

Lev laughs at the memory while the man in front of us screams around his gag. The sound of his ribs cracking fills the room, and if I didn’t know what a sex-trafficking asshole he is, I’d feel sorry for the guy because Matvey is beyond pissed. He’s full-on enraged, and these men are feeling the brunt of it. It’s going to take a lot of killing to make my brother feel better, but these five are a good start.

“We can’t stay here all night,” Danil reminds us. “Konstantin is going to notice the cameras are down and send someone to check this place out.”

“Nope,” Matvey says, brow furrowed in concentration as he works on cutting the man’s heart out. “He sent a message to one of Konstantin’s men, letting them know that there were some issues with the cameras but that it was nothing to worry about. We should be good for a few hours at least.”

“I definitely should’ve brought snacks,” I whisper to Lev.

“Oh my god,” he mutters, digging in his pocket. He pulls out a package of fruit snacks and tosses them at me.

I catch them with a big smile on my face. “Do you carry these around just in case I get hungry? That is so fucking sweet.”

Lev laughs and shakes his head. “Jolene sometimes gets hungry when we’re out, so I’ve started carrying them. They’re organic and a good source of vitamin C.”

“Fucking awesome,” I mumble around the ones I’ve already stuffed in my mouth. “You take such good care of me.”

“They’re for my wife.”

I nod and shovel a few more in. “Uh-huh.”

He can hear my sarcasm and gives a soft laugh. “Don’t be an ass or I won’t give you any more.”

“You have more?”

“Maybe if you behave yourself.”

I smile and pop another one in my mouth. “You’re going to be a great dad. I can already feel myself wanting to make you proud.”

“You just want more food.”

“It’s called a twofer, Lev, a win-win.”

We watch Matvey move on to the next guy while Lev says, “It’s nice to see your plan to quickly annul your marriage is working so well.”

I laugh and nudge his shoulder with mine. “Yeah, that plan backfired like a motherfucker. I did not see that one coming,” I admit.

“You never do,” Lev says. “I know Jolene knocked me on my ass.”

“Emily, too,” Roman says from the other side of the room.

“Same here,” Danil says with a grin.

“And Alina did the same to me,” Matvey says, punctuating each word with a stab to the next guy’s chest.

“Love will make you do crazy shit,” I say with a laugh, watching my brother eviscerate the half-dead guy on the ground in front of us.

“Man, our ladies have us so fucking whipped.” I smile and pop another fruit snack in my mouth.

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Chapter 13

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Katya

When I wake and find the bed empty, the first thing I do is go looking for Vitaly. It's still the middle of the night, but I feel his absence strong enough to let me know he didn't just get up to use the bathroom or get a drink of water. The place feels empty without him, exactly how my life felt before I met him.

Tying the belt of my robe, I make my way downstairs, surprised to see our four assigned bodyguards sitting at the counter drinking coffee. Sergei notices me first and gives me a nod.

"Everything okay?" he asks, causing the other three men to turn around and stare at me.

"Yeah, just wondering where my husband is." I walk over and fill a mug with coffee because there's no way in hell I'm going back to bed anytime soon. Leaning against the counter, I face the four men. "So what's going on?"

Sergei gives a small shrug while Aleksandr scratches at his beard and Grigori becomes very interested in something on his phone. Feliks gives me what's supposed to be a comforting smile.

"They had to go out and take care of something," Sergei finally says, "but they'll be back soon."

My mind immediately goes to images of Matvey getting loose and going after Alina while his brothers try to stop him. I shudder at the thought of them charging the mansion without a plan in place. I know how many men my brothers have on duty at any given time, and I know how fucking armed they are. This is not going to end well.

Seeing my face, Feliks quickly says, “They didn’t go to your brother’s house.”

“Thank fuck,” I groan, relaxing against the counter again. “You about gave me a heart attack.”

Feliks’s face pales. “Please don’t fucking do that. Your husband will kill me if something happens to you.”

I give him a reassuring smile. “I’m fine. No passing out or heart attacks, I promise.”

He lets out a relieved sigh right before Sergei says, “They just pulled up.”

I dash around the kitchen island so I can see the screen the men are looking at. The image is black and white and not the clearest picture I’ve ever seen, but I immediately recognize my husband as soon as he steps out of the SUV. He’s laughing and looking over at Lev while they all walk towards the elevators. We watch them make the ride up, and it isn’t until I hear the ding and see the doors open that I realize what they’ve really been up to.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, watching Matvey step into the hall. He’s covered in dried blood. His hoodie is drenched in it and so are his hands and face. “Are you hurt?”

He gives me a rare smile and shakes his head. “Not a scratch on me.”

As he walks by, I look at Roman, who’s not quite as bloody as Matvey, but still pretty damn soaked in it. He just smiles and shrugs before giving my head a soft pat and walking past me to the kitchen. Lev gives me a friendly wink while Danil laughs and gently nudges my shoulder. Vitaly is the last one to step out of the elevator, and as soon as he sees me, his gorgeous face breaks into a huge grin.

“Baby, what are you doing up?”

Before I can answer, he picks me up and swings me around. I can’t help but laugh as I clutch him tighter. His excitement is always contagious, and it’s one of the things I love most about him. Vitaly goes all in, no matter what he’s doing.

When his lips find mine, I twine my fingers into his hair and kiss him back, letting him know how much I’ve missed him. The kiss is hungry, but we’re both holding back because we’re not alone.

Pulling back, he smiles and whispers, “Soon, *ptichka*

I nod and stay wrapped around him as he carries me into the kitchen. He sets me on the island, staying between my legs as he asks Sergei and the others how everything went. They talk for a few minutes before the four men are dismissed. I wave goodbye and then say goodnight to Vitaly's brothers. They each walk off to their rooms, leaving us alone in the kitchen.

"You going to tell me what the hell happened tonight and whose blood you're all covered in?"

"I'm not covered in blood, baby. I behaved myself tonight."

I run my fingers along his neck and cheek. "You have blood splatter," I tell him. "You were close enough to get hit."

"Well, that's because Matvey went fucking ballistic. Lev and I were just sitting and watching. He brought snacks."

I laugh and meet his gorgeous whiskey-brown eyes. "I married such a weirdo."

"A weirdo?" He laughs and kisses the tip of my nose. "I'm not the one who brought the snacks. I just ate them, so if anyone's a weirdo, it's Lev for bringing fruit snacks to a killing."

"Who died tonight?"

Vitaly shrugs and starts kissing a line down my jaw. "Some Lebedev men who were guarding the building where the auctions take place."

"Is that going to make trouble for you with Konstantin?"

He gives my earlobe a suck, making it hard for me to concentrate. "We'll come up with something. Maybe we'll blame it on Dominic." He gives a soft laugh. "He'll love that."

When his teeth graze the skin of my neck, I lean my head back, giving him better access as my hands drift lower so I can grab his firm ass.

"We're in the kitchen," I remind him before I lose all ability to think clearly about this.

"We are," he agrees, nipping the crook of my neck while one hand slides into my robe to cup my breast. His thumb grazes my nipple, pulling a soft whimper from my aching body.

When I open my eyes, I see the list of rules on the fridge in front of me and smile. "You said you never bring women here, right?"

"Never, baby."

"So you've never gotten to enjoy the rule you vetoed?"

His body freezes before he pulls back to look at me. If he's trying to hide his excitement, he's failing miserably, and the sight of his lit-up eyes

makes me laugh.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

He smiles even bigger. “It’s definitely a no, baby.”

When I run my hands down his chest and start to undo the button on his jeans, he cups my face and runs his eyes over me.

“You don’t have to do this. You know that, right?”

“I want to do it, Vitaly, so stop arguing and let me suck my husband’s dick.”

“Fucking hell,” he groans, already straining against his jeans. “You look so goddamn sweet, baby, but you have the filthiest mouth when you get all riled up.”

I turn my head and give the tip of his finger a soft bite. “It’s about to get a lot filthier.”

He groans and watches me suck his finger between my lips. Vitaly’s had his head buried between my legs more times than I can count, but this is the first time I’ve returned the favor. It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s just that I’m intimidated by his size and by all his past experiences, but I’m tired of letting that stop me from doing what I want.

Slowly sliding his finger out of my mouth, I unzipped his jeans and reach in so I can wrap my hand around him. The feel of his hard length sends a shiver through me. Just touching him has my body lighting up from the inside out, because I know what this thing can do and I know the pleasure that comes with it.

Vitaly drags his thumb along my lips. “I’ve thought about fucking this pouty mouth so many goddamn times.”

“You have?”

“I have.” He slides his thumb between my lips, forcing my mouth open. “And every time you mouth off, I think about fucking you so hard that all you can do is take it and choke around my cock.”

“I don’t mouth off,” I say, but my words are muffled by the way he’s still holding my mouth.

He gives me a sexy smirk. “You can be a smartass, *ptichka*, but it’s one of the many things I love about you.”

Pulling my hand from his jeans, I put it on his chest and push him back enough for me to hop down as his thumb slips from between my lips.

“Well, let’s put this smartass mouth to good use,” I say, kneeling before him.

He grins down at me and frees his cock. My eyes run over him, and when he sees how nervous I am, he reaches down and runs his fingers through my hair, gently fisting it.

“Relax, baby.” He fists himself, guiding his head to my mouth. Dragging his crown along my lips, he coats them in pre-cum, groaning when my tongue darts out for a taste. “We’re going to take this slow.”

“Okay,” I whisper, and he lets out another deep groan when the heat of my breath hits him. Looking up at him, I stick my tongue out and swipe it along his slit, licking up his arousal.

“Fucking hell, *ptichka*,” he groans, fisting my hair tighter. “You trying to make a liar out of me?”

He watches as I part my lips and slowly suck him in. The salty taste of him fills my mouth, and the deep groan he gives makes me brave enough to give him a good suck, pulling him deeper into me.

“God, you tempt me like no other woman ever has,” he growls. “You have no idea how badly I want to thrust into this sweet mouth and take what’s mine, but I want you to enjoy this.” He gives a soft laugh. “I don’t want you to hate blowjobs.”

I run my tongue over him and grab onto his thighs, taking him in a little deeper. He lets out another masculine groan and gently rocks his hips, giving me a bit more. I feel the power vibrating off him, and I know he could bury himself inside me if he wanted to. He can make this as rough and brutal as he wants, but he’s choosing to be gentle, and I fucking love him so goddamn much for it.

“That’s right, baby,” he murmurs, watching me take more of him in. “Suck me just like that.”

I run my tongue over him and suck him harder. His ragged breaths and groans have me clenching my thighs together. My pussy fucking aches for him, but I ignore it, putting all my focus on making him feel good, because there’s nothing sexier than watching my husband come undone from my touch.

When I try and take him deeper, I gag around him. My body tries to pull back on pure instinct, but Vitaly tightens his grip on my hair, holding me in place.

“Easy, baby,” he groans. “Just relax.” He gives me a wink and runs his thumb under my eye, wiping away the tears that welled up with my gag

reflex. “There was no way you were going to get through this without gagging.”

He laughs at the look I give him.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I don’t have a small dick, so you’re always going to gag when you take me in your mouth. I can help make it easier for you, though.” He drags his finger down my cheek before running it over my stretched-out top lip. “Would you like that, *ptichka*? Do you want me to help you suck my big cock?”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan, willing to do anything to make this a little easier on myself.

“Good girl,” he praises, making my pussy clench with a need that’s threatening to drive me crazy. “Just relax and breathe through your nose.”

I do as he says, concentrating on long, slow breaths through my nose as he very slowly slides in a bit more. As soon as he feels my throat start to convulse, he pulls back, allowing me a full breath of air.

“You’re doing so good, baby, and you look fucking sexy as hell with my cock in your mouth.”

I keep my eyes locked on his when he rocks his hips, sliding back into me.

“That’s right. Keep your eyes on mine. Don’t you dare look away. I’m going to fuck this sweet mouth while you watch exactly what you do to me.”

When he sees me squirm, trying like hell to get some relief to my throbbing clit, he gives a soft laugh and fists my hair even tighter.

“Does my wife need to come?”

“Mm-hmm,” I whimper.

“Fuck,” he growls. “Moan again, baby.”

I give a deep moan, letting the vibrations hit his thick cock as his eyes go heavy-lidded and glassy.

“I swear I’ll make you come so many goddamn times tonight, but right now I’m going to use your mouth and come so fucking hard down your throat, and I want to see you swallow every damn drop I give you.”

I give another moan and reach one hand up to cup his balls, letting my nails drag lightly over his skin. Unable to resist, he thrusts harder into my mouth. I gag around him, but he doesn’t stop. Still fisting my hair with one hand, he brings the other down to my neck, squeezing gently as he holds me in place. I force myself to calm down and to focus on my breathing. My

eyes stay locked on his as he buries himself so far down my throat that he cuts off my air. I'm helpless before him, but instead of taking advantage of it and using me to the point of pain, he keeps himself in enough control so that even though my mouth aches and my throat feels raw, it's bearable.

I never expected blowjobs to be pleasant, and they're not as far as the physical feeling of having a huge dick thrust down my throat, but I hadn't been expecting to feel so aroused. Watching Vitaly take his pleasure is downright intoxicating, and knowing that it's my mouth causing the dark hunger in his eyes and the tightness in his body and the feral groans coming from deep within his chest makes me feel like the sexiest woman alive.

Spit drips from my swollen lips, and my scalp stings from how tightly he's fisting my hair, but I tighten my fingers on his thigh, urging him for more while my other hand continues to caress his balls.

"God, you're fucking perfect," he growls, finding an even faster rhythm. "I'm close," he warns, keeping his eyes locked on mine. Mine are watering, but I don't look away. He groans my name right before I feel the heat of his release hit the back of my throat. His cock pulses inside my mouth, giving me everything he has. His eyes go glassy as the muscles in his face relax and he lets out a sigh of pure relief before giving me an adorable, loopy grin that would make me laugh if my mouth wasn't still stuffed.

"Damn," he sighs, sliding his hand up my neck so he can cup my cheek. "I'm so glad we got married."

I run my tongue over him and slowly pull back before letting him drop from my swollen lips. "Me too," I say, returning his big smile. My mouth and jaw ache, my knees are sore from kneeling on the hard floor, and my pussy is throbbing with a need that's almost painful, but it was all worth it to see this look on my husband's face. His eyes run over me as his thumb slides along my swollen lips.

"I love you so fucking much, baby."

"I love you, too."

He reaches down and picks me up, not even bothering to tuck himself back into his pants. His lips crash against mine, claiming every inch of my mouth like his cock just did moments before. He lets out the sexiest groan when he tastes himself on me and brings a hand down to squeeze my ass, pressing me tighter against him.

"Baby," he murmurs against my lips.

“Hmm?”

His hand slips under my robe, finding my bare ass. “If you ever walk around in front of other men without any panties on again, I’m going to spank your ass so goddamn hard you won’t be able to sit down for a week.”

I smile against his lips. “There’s the caveman I married.”

He laughs and digs his fingers into my ass. “I’m not joking, *ptichka*.”

“I know you aren’t. That’s why it’s so cute.”

Pulling back, he meets my eyes and lifts a brow. “It’s cute that I’m going to spank your ass raw for letting other men catch scent of your sweet pussy?”

I lean closer and kiss the tip of his nose. “It’s cute that you think you can.”

That really makes him laugh. “Oh, baby,” he says, carrying me out of the kitchen. “I’m going to fuck that sass right out of you.”

I smile because it’s the exact reaction I was hoping for. He’s already fully hard by the time we hit the stairs, and when I reach down and lift my robe so I can press my bare pussy against his length, he groans and cups the back of my head, deepening the kiss while walking faster. As soon as we’re in our room, he’s ripping my robe open and pressing me against the wall.

“I used all my restraint when I was fucking your mouth, *ptichka*,” he warns. “This won’t be nearly as gentle.”

Instead of hearing the warning, his words send a thrill through me, making me even more desperate to have him inside me. I’m addicted to everything about this man, especially when he goes absolutely feral for me.

“You like that, don’t you?” he asks, noticing my body’s reaction. “I think you like driving me crazy.” His fingers dig into my ass as he runs his tongue up my neck. “I think you like seeing me lose all control because I’m so fucking desperate to be inside you.”

“Yes,” I moan, not even trying to deny it as my hips rock against him. I’m so wet I’m dripping onto his cock, and his eyes turn even darker when he feels it. “I like seeing you lose control.” Reaching down, I wrap my fingers around him as best I can and guide him to my slit so he’s pressing against me. “Show me how badly you need me, Vitaly.” I grind against his head, moaning at the sensations that flood me. “Fuck me,” I beg. “Fuck your wife.”

With a growl he brings his mouth to my chest, sucking my nipple as he slams into me. I let out a choked scream and clutch him tighter. He gives

me a soft bite as he buries himself inside me. Keeping us locked together, he gives my nipple a soft, teasing suck before lifting his face to mine.

“Is this what you wanted, wife?”

He slowly rocks his hips, causing just enough movement inside me to make me arch up against him and let out an embarrassingly loud mewling sound. His deep laugh has my eyes darting to his.

“No, I want it harder,” I say as he arches a brow at me.

“Someone’s feeling extra feisty tonight.” He slowly pulls out of me just so he can slam back in, pulling another whimper from my shaking body. “Is this what you want? You want me to fuck you so hard you’ll be sore tomorrow? Is that what you want, baby?” He nips at my bottom lip. “You want every step you take to remind you who you belong to and who owns this tight little pussy?”

“Yes,” I gasp as he picks up the pace again, fucking me hard enough to hurt. I don’t know why a part of me craves the pain, but it does. That intoxicating blend of pain and pleasure washes over me, and I happily give in to it.

He kisses me just as hard, taking everything from me except my ability to feel. I’m completely at his mercy, held up by his strong arms and trapped on the cock that’s spreading me so goddamn wide. When he moves his hand, I’m so dazed I barely register it. It’s not until I feel the pad of his finger press against my asshole that I realize what’s going on.

“Vitaly,” I whimper, not sure what he’s planning or how exactly I feel about it.

“Yes, baby?”

I hear the amusement in his voice and then his soft laugh when he presses firmer against my tight hole and I let out another shaky moan at the sudden rush of pleasure it gives me.

“You like that?”

He gently circles the nerve endings I had no idea I had as I shake my head and let out a breathy “Yes.”

“Good, because this is the hole I’m coming in, *ptichka*.”

Before I can freak out about what he’s just said, he thrusts into me harder right as he slowly slides his finger into my ass. The warring sensations send me immediately into the most powerful orgasm of my life.

“Fuck,” Vitaly grits out as my body clenches around him and I scream his name. He keeps working my ass and pussy, and by the time I start to

come down, he has two fingers inside me and his body is covered in sweat, every part of him tense with the need to let go. He fights his own release, though, as he stays buried inside me and carries me to the bed.

I'm expecting him to put me on my hands and knees, but he surprises me by sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard while keeping me in his lap, straddling him. He lets out another deep groan when he slides his fingers from my ass. Pulling my robe off he tosses it aside and then gets rid of his shirt. His jeans are pulled down so low by this point that it only takes a few seconds for him to kick them off. Reaching to the nightstand, he pulls out a brand-new bottle of lube.

He gives me a wink. "I've always been an optimist."

Even though I'm nervous, I can't help but laugh. "I thought you'd put me on my hands and knees," I admit.

"I can do that if you want, but I thought we could try this. I want to see you when I take your ass. Plus, this puts you in control. You can take me as deep or shallow as you want."

"Shallow sounds good," I quickly say, making him smile.

"I think you might surprise yourself. Your ass was very receptive to my fingers."

My face heats up, but the memory of how good it had felt keeps me from being too embarrassed about it. He's still rock-hard inside me, and when I rock my hips, the sensation pulls a groan from both of us. His hand slides down my body, and when his thumb brushes over my clit, I let out a gasp and dig my fingers into his shoulders.

"This position also lets me play a bit more."

"You're trying to make me pass out again, aren't you?"

He laughs and opens the bottle of lube. "Maybe."

I cup his face and search his eyes when I ask, "You won't be disappointed if all I take is half your head."

He smiles and kisses me slowly. "I will never be disappointed, and you can take as little of me as you want. You're in control of the ass, baby. Your pussy is mine," he says, rocking his hips up and gripping my waist to hold me in place, "and I'll fuck it as hard and deep as I want, but I'm handing full control of your tight ass over to you." He gives me a wink. "At least for now."

I nod and run my tongue over his bottom lip as he pours a generous amount of lube down the crack of my ass before using his fingers to lather it

over my tight hole. His slippery fingers run over me, and I can't help but start working my hips, sliding up and down the hard length of his cock.

"That's right, baby, just think about how good this feels." His lips kiss a line down my neck while he slides a finger in my ass and his other hand lightly brushes my clit. "Every part of you is so fucking perfect," he whispers against my skin. I feel his lips spread in a smile when he adds, "And your ass is going to love my cock."

My laugh is cut off when he rubs my clit in a firm circle and adds a second finger to my ass. His lips and tongue and teeth devour my skin as he effortlessly throws me into another orgasm. He scissors his fingers, taking advantage of how relaxed my body has become as he tries to get me ready for something far bigger.

"I don't know how you do that," I pant, resting my forehead against his.
"Do what?"

"Make me come so damn easily."

He smiles and slides his fingers out of my ass before giving my cheek a soft pat. "It's because my wife is so in love with me and obsessed with my body and thinks I'm a sex god."

"Is that what it is?"

"It is."

I return his smile and shrug, because he's not wrong. It all works together to keep me in a constant state of arousal. My eyes run over his tattooed chest, admiring the hard muscle and the way his abs tighten with every rock of his hips.

"I'd be offended if I didn't know how unbelievably in love you are with me. I'm not just a piece of meat, *ptichka*."

I laugh at his *I'm trying so hard to seem offended* look, because as much as he talks, I can tell he loves the way I eye-fuck him.

"Is my ass sufficiently warmed up?"

He pats my cheek and gives me a wink. "We're about to find out."

I slide up the length of him, watching the way the veins in his neck stand out and the dark look in his eyes that makes it clear he's on the verge of losing control. His fingers dig into my hips while he uses his other hand to pour lube on his cock and position his head at my back hole.

"It's all you, baby," he groans. "Use me however you want."

My first instinct is to tighten up, but I realize that's the worst thing I can do right now. Vitaly must sense my struggle because he brings both hands

to my ass cheeks, spreading them wide as he kisses me slowly.

“Relax, *ptichka*. I promise you’re going to be coming again soon.”

I smile at his confident tone, but we both know he’s telling the truth. Vitaly doesn’t need to talk a big game or make outlandish promises. He just delivers again and again, so when he says another orgasm is in my very near future, I believe him.

Gripping my cheeks tighter, he very gently pushes me down as he rocks his hips up, pressing the head of his cock against me. He lets up before he actually penetrates the tight ring of muscle, but it’s enough to have me wishing for more. His tongue slides along mine while he keeps teasing me, and when it gets to the point where all I can think about is getting him inside me, I lower my hips.

“Fuck,” I gasp as I take his head in. The sensation is so foreign but also so fucking good, and for a second I can’t speak. I just cling to Vitaly and hold myself in place, letting my body get used to this new feeling.

“God, you’re so fucking tight,” he groans against my lips. Bringing one hand between us, he drags two fingers along my soaking wet slit. “Ready for me to fill both your holes, baby?”

“What?” I gasp, watching his fingers slide along my pussy before thrusting three of them inside me. “Holy fuck,” I yell, shocked by the immediate rush of pleasure that shoots through me. And just like that, he’s flipped a switch inside me. I’m no longer scared of taking him in more; it’s all I can fucking think about. I moan his name and lower down, taking more of him into my ass. Now his hand on my ass cheek isn’t guiding me down, it’s holding me in check so I don’t rush it and hurt myself.

“Goddamn,” he groans, kissing me harder while the sloppy sounds of him finger-fucking me fill the space around us. “I can feel how much you like my cock in your ass, baby. You’re fucking soaking my hand.”

I bite his bottom lip and sink down even more, craving the delicious burn and the feeling of being stuffed uncomfortably full. His fingers and cock work me in a rhythm that quickly brings me to the edge. My breaths grow erratic as my body starts to shake. My nipples scrape along his chest, causing another shiver to run through me, and when he presses his thumb against my clit and rubs me in firm circles, I throw my head back and come so hard my vision darkens. The wet heat of his mouth closes around my breast, sucking hard as I sink down the rest of his length, taking him all the

way in while my pussy clenches around his fingers and I fall apart for my husband.

He keeps working me, forcing another orgasm onto my already spent body before rocking his hips and chasing after his own pleasure. With a growl, he bites my nipple and gives one last thrust before spilling his seed and claiming the last piece of my body I had to give. He truly owns every part of me now, and I'm surprised by how happy that makes me. I hadn't expected to want to give this part of myself to anyone, but there's nothing I want to keep from Vitaly. I want him to have it all. I want him to have all of *me*.

Giving my nipple one last suck, he pulls back and kisses his way up my body before wrapping his arms around me and cupping the back of my head.

"You're the best thing to ever happen to me, *ptichka*," he whispers against my lips.

"Are you just saying that because your dick is in my ass?"

He laughs and brushes a sweaty strand of hair off my cheek. "No, but it does feel fucking amazing."

"It does. You were right."

He gives me a wink. "I usually am."

I laugh at his cocky smirk and shake my head at him. "It's going to be really hard to keep you humble. Maybe I'll try to stop orgasming so easily. That should knock you down a peg or two."

"I would love to see you try, baby. I'm guessing you wouldn't last very long at all."

I don't bother arguing, which just makes his smile grow. When I start to lift off him, his smile falters when he sees me wince.

"I might've been a bit overzealous," I groan, feeling the sting that I'd been too aroused to notice before.

"Come here." He picks me up and carries me to the bathroom. "You need a nice soak. Let me take care of you, *ptichka*."

And that's exactly what he does. We soak in the tub together until the water turns cool, and then he dries me off and carries me to bed. Snuggling up to him, I'm asleep in minutes, and when I wake up, he's already dressed with a mug of hot coffee waiting for me.

"Damn, we should do anal more often," I tell him, reaching for the mug.

"I like to spoil you. It has nothing to do with anything else."

I'm not sure I fully believe him, but when he hands me a plate of waffles, I decide I no longer care what the reason is.

"You cooked?"

"Sort of." He laughs and motions towards the plate. "I microwaved." He gives me a wink. "Still counts."

"I'm not complaining." I cut off a piece of the syrupy waffle and groan in appreciation when it hits my mouth.

"Keep making noises like that, and I'm going to fuck you again."

I'm still a bit sore from the night before, so I keep my appreciative moans to a minimum while I take another bite. He sits on the edge of the bed, drinking his coffee while I run my eyes over the jeans and black sweater he's wearing. It looks buttery soft and hugs his impressive frame, accentuating the broad shoulders and trim waist.

"Don't forget to eat, sweetheart." He gives a soft laugh when I meet his eyes and realize he's caught me eye-fucking him again. When I take another bite, he says, "Dominic Alessi is coming over today. Danil finally got a meeting set up with Casimir, so that's happening this evening, and we're going to need to meet with your brothers and come up with some explanation for the men Matvey and Roman killed last night."

"I'll go with you," I quickly say, but he just laughs and looks at me like I've lost my damn mind.

"Not a chance in hell, *ptichka*. I told you the last time we were there that you would never see them again, and I meant it. Danil's going with me. We obviously can't trust Matvey or Roman to behave themselves, and we need Lev to stay here and make sure they don't leave."

"I don't want you around them again either." I set my fork down, no longer hungry, and try to push my plate away.

"Hey, you need to eat more than that." His hand covers mine, giving me a soft squeeze. "My job will always be dangerous, you know that, but I can handle things with your brothers."

"Don't you usually just do strip club stuff?"

"I only started Pink because we needed a cover and a way to gather information. When we first got here, we spent a lot of time at the Red Viper, getting close to David and Aaron."

"God, I hate those two. I've never been to the club, but I've heard enough over the years to know they're a couple of bastards who will do anything to keep my brothers happy."

“They are, yeah,” Vitaly says. “We’ve been looking forward to killing them.”

When I take another bite of food, he gives me a wink, and I have the ridiculous urge to clean my plate just so I can see that proud look on his face again. I try not to think too hard about what I would do for one of Vitaly’s sexy winks. I’m guessing the list would shock the hell out of me.

Popping another piece of waffle in my mouth, I say, “If I can’t go with you to see my brothers, then I at least want to be there for the meeting with Dominic.”

The corner of his mouth quirks up the tiniest bit. “I’m not sure you understand how this works, baby.”

“I know exactly how this works. My brothers tried to keep me in the dark, but that’s not how I want things to be with you. The Bratva is all I know, Vitaly. It’s been my life since my first breath. I don’t expect you to let me go into a gunfight with you.”

He snorts out a laugh and shakes his head in an *over my fucking dead body* kind of way, but I ignore him and keep talking.

“But it’s my two brothers you’re planning on taking down. Maybe I can help.”

Leaning closer, he gives me a soft kiss, running his tongue over my lips before dipping inside for more. He threads his fingers in my hair, deepening the kiss before pulling back with a smile.

“So goddamn sweet.”

“You’re trying to sidetrack me.”

“Is it working?”

I laugh and grab his wrist, kissing the scarred palm of his hand. “Yes, but I still want in on the meeting.”

Vitaly lets out a pained sigh. “Is this the happy medium everyone talks about? Marriage is about compromise and all that?”

“I think it might be, yes.”

“Well, shit, I can’t say no then.”

“Can I go with you when you meet with my brothers?”

He laughs. “Nice try, but no way in hell. I can compromise with small things, *ptichka*, but if it concerns your safety, then I’m putting my goddamn foot down.”

“Such a caveman,” I say, but I’m smiling too big to sound angry. The truth is I like it when he goes all alpha male on me.

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Chapter 14

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Vitaly

When Dominic steps off the elevator, Katya is right by my side. I look down at her and give her a wink before wrapping an arm around her shoulders. She's clearly proud of herself for weaseling her way into the meeting, but the truth is that as long as there isn't any danger, I love having her by my side. I was planning on inviting her to the meeting anyway, but I'm not going to tell her that. She looks too damn cute when she's gloating.

"Finally invited to the Melnikov home," Dominic says with a smile. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"You and me both," Lev says with a pretend groan. Ever since Lev shot Dominic over a misunderstanding, they've had a bond of sorts and they like nothing more than to get under each other's skin.

"Well, it's a day of many firsts," Roman says. "I'd like you to meet my wife, Emily."

Emily holds out her hand. Dominic shakes it and leans down to kiss her cheek. "It's nice to meet you, and congratulations," he says, nodding towards her stomach. "Roman said it's a boy."

Emily beams up at him. "It is, yes. We're pretty excited."

Dominic looks around the room, smiling at Simona, who he's already met, before looking over at Jolene. "It's nice to meet you," he says, holding out his hand.

"Don't try and kiss her," Lev says before Dominic can lean down.

Dominic mutters something in Italian and then switches to English to tell Jolene, "Your husband is ridiculous. Did he tell you he shot me?"

“I did,” Lev says, answering for her, “and I told her that you’re still whining about it.”

Dominic gives Jolene a wink. “It hurt like a son of a bitch.”

Jolene laughs and leans back against her husband while Dominic looks over at us. His dark eyes run over Katya before he gives me a smirk. He pulls an envelope from the inside pocket of his expensive suit and hands it to me.

“Congratulations on your wedding.”

“What is this?”

“A wedding gift.”

I hand it to Katya so she can open it. When I see the business card for an Italian restaurant, I look up at him.

“It’s the best Italian restaurant in the city,” he says.

Katya turns the card over, and on it Dominic’s written, *Guests of Dominic Alessi*.

“Take your wife out and have a good time. You can hate the Italian mafia all you want, but you can’t deny we have the best goddamn food on the planet.”

“You haven’t tried my grandma’s borsch,” I tell him.

Lev laughs and says in Russian, “You don’t have a grandma.”

“Don’t tell him that,” I say. “Besides, I bet whoever the hell my grandma was, she could cook one hell of a borsch.”

“You’re terrible,” Katya says, laughing. I kiss her head, loving that she speaks Russian. I speak English fluently, but Russian is my first language, and it will always be the one I prefer.

Dominic looks at Katya. “I don’t want to know what he’s saying, do I?”

“Probably not.” She smiles and holds out her hand. “I’m Katya.”

“Nice to meet the woman who made Vitaly fall to his knees.” He gives me a smirk and kisses the back of my wife’s hand.

“Fucking Italians,” I mutter loud enough for him to hear.

He laughs and smacks my shoulder. “I hear we’re as stubborn as the Russians.”

“And overly dramatic,” I say.

Dominic shrugs with a good-natured smile on his face. “It’s in our blood.”

“That and a shit-ton of red wine,” I say with a laugh.

He gives me a disbelieving look. “Don’t even fucking start with that shit. I could cut you and you’d probably bleed vodka.”

“Okay, that was a good one,” I admit, laughing.

Matvey leans against the counter, watching our interaction. I can tell he’s antsy to get started, so when we walk over to the table, Emily, Jolene, and Simona leave, knowing it’s best if they don’t know certain things. My stubborn wife looks up at me and grins, taking the seat next to me.

“Interesting,” Dominic says, sitting down across from us.

“It’s called compromise, Dominic,” I tell him. “If you were married, you’d know a thing or two about it.”

He laughs and takes the drink Roman hands him. “I don’t plan on marrying, so I guess I’ll never need to learn about it.”

“You’re going to be taking over the family business, right? Doesn’t that mean you need to marry and produce heirs?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “I’m not sure when that will happen. My father had me when he was older. I’m the baby of the family, if you can believe it, but something tells me he won’t be retiring anytime soon.”

“What are you, early thirties?” Roman asks.

“Fuck you,” Dominic says with a laugh. “I’m twenty-five.”

“You’re younger than me?” Lev asks, laughing at the look Dominic is giving him.

“I don’t look that fucking old.” He scrubs a hand over his light beard. “The facial hair ages me and so does this fucking job.”

I laugh. “Yeah, that’s what it is.” He knows I’m teasing him, so he laughs. He’s a handsome fucker, and he knows it.

He takes another drink and looks at us, “Okay, stop making fun of me and tell me what the fuck is going on.”

We take turns filling him in on everything that’s happened, and by the time we’re finished, he’s on his second drink and letting out a deep sigh.

“How are you planning on explaining the deaths? If you blame it on my men, then it just makes you look weak, like we’re still a problem you can’t control.”

“Yeah, we’ve already thought about that,” Roman says. “The last thing we want is Konstantin sending some of his men after your family.”

“We hid the bodies,” Lev says, “but there’s no way in hell Konstantin doesn’t know about five missing men by now.”

“We could tell him it was a local gang that we sometimes have issues with,” I suggest. “Make it seem like it was a drug runner encroaching on our territory, that they’ll often test the waters a couple of times a year to see if it’s worth the risk for them.”

“That might work.” Dominic takes another drink, leaning back in his chair. “You’ll have to retaliate, though.”

“I say fuck ‘em,” Matvey says from the other end of the table. “We tell him we don’t know what the fuck happened. Let him send his men on a wild-goose chase. Why the hell should we care? We’re going to kill them long before they figure out we had a hand in this.”

We’re all quiet for a few seconds before Katya gives a soft laugh. “He’s not wrong. My brothers will be pissed, but there’s not much they can do about it, especially if you tell them you’re trying to figure it out. It might help if you suggest that it could be an enemy of theirs that did it, someone who has nothing to do with your Bratva. My brothers have a lot of enemies, and attacks like this might be rare, but they do happen.”

I lean down and whisper against her ear. “I’m glad you’re here, baby. You look sexy as fuck when you talk business.”

She gives a soft laugh and pats my thigh as I turn back to my brothers. “I think my beautiful wife is right. We lay it at their feet and let them puzzle it out.”

Dominic looks over at Danil. “You still meeting with their hacker later?”

“Yeah, it’ll be at the mansion, so I guess I can talk to Konstantin about his men when I’m there.”

“I’m going with you,” I tell him. I point at Matvey and Roman. “You two aren’t invited, and Lev will be babysitting your asses.” I glance over at Lev. “Don’t let them fool you with fake snoring.”

Lev raises a pierced brow at me. “Well, I’m not a dumbass, so that’s not going to happen.”

“Forty-five fucking minutes!” I laugh and shake my head. “I was about to piss myself.”

Matvey’s gravelly voice cuts above the laughter. “If it makes you feel any better, I would’ve kept it up for hours. You didn’t stand a chance.”

“That does make me feel better. Thank you, brother.”

Dominic shakes his head at us and takes another drink. Looking at Katya, he says, “You married into one hell of a crazy family.”

“Trust me, the one I came from is a million times worse.” Remembering what I told her about Dominic, she leans closer across the table and says, “I’m really sorry about your sister. It makes me sick to know my brothers are behind all of this.”

Dominic keeps his face calm, but I notice the way his jaw tightens at the mention of his sister. “I appreciate you saying that, Katya, but this is on them, not you.”

I cup the back of her head, weaving my fingers into her thick hair as she leans against me, taking comfort from my touch.

“I’m still sorry,” she says, and I watch Dominic give her an appreciative nod and a hint of a smile before turning back to Danil.

“Let me know when you find anything I can use.” He points to Lev. “And don’t forget to invite me to the party. My men and I will be there as soon as you give me a time and place.”

“Don’t worry,” Lev tells him. “We’re not cutting you out of the fun.”

Dominic nods and stands up, buttoning his suit jacket before checking his phone. “All right, I’ll wait for the call then. I need to get going.” He pockets his phone and looks at Danil. “Let me know when you find something.”

“You know I will,” Danil says. “It might take a few days, but I should be able to get into their system after I meet with this guy. If not, we’ll just get the information out of him when we take down the Bratva.”

“Either way works for me.” Dominic says, reminding us all that he’s as used to violence as we are. It’s easy to forget it when looking at his polished, put together exterior, but he’s just as much of a killer as we are. He just hides it a little better.

With one last nod, he heads for the elevator. The rule was he had to arrive alone, so I’m sure his men are anxious to get him back in their sights. Antonio may still run the family, but everyone knows who’s really in charge. Dominic’s going to be taking over soon, and no one wants to be on his bad side when he does it.

“I kind of like him,” Katya says, making me laugh.

“He grows on you,” Lev says.

“Like an old man’s dick.”

Lev laughs and looks over at me. “What the fuck does that even mean?”

I pull Katya into my lap. “It was completely unexpected and slightly disturbing at first.” I shrug and add, “But now it just seems natural.”

“You make the weirdest fucking comparisons,” Danil says, grabbing his laptop and heading back downstairs. “You might not want to mention that one to Dominic.”

“He might appreciate it,” I say with a laugh.

“Something tells me he won’t,” Roman says, still laughing as he goes off in search of Emily.

The others walk off, leaving me and Katya at the table. I kiss her shoulder and tighten my arms around her, breathing in her sweet vanilla scent.

“So it’s all going to happen soon, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” I tell her. “Matvey and Roman won’t be able to hold out much longer.”

“I wish you didn’t have to go over there today.”

“Me too. I don’t particularly enjoy your brothers’ company.”

She turns and places the palm of her hand against my cheek. “Don’t do anything stupid, Vitaly.”

“Never, *ptichka*. I have too much to lose if I do.”

I hate the sense of foreboding that’s starting to hang over us, this feeling that I need to savor every moment with her because it could be our last. I never once thought that we wouldn’t all make it out of this, but now I’m not so sure. We hadn’t planned on Alina being held by another Bratva boss. We’d assumed she was privately bought and that it would be a fairly easy thing to kill the fucker and rescue her. That’s not how this is going to go down. This is going to be a war between two powerful Bratvas—a bloodbath that’s going to annihilate one side and potentially destroy the other. So many fucking things could go wrong, and I’m worrying about all of them.

Katya senses my mood and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tightly against her. She’s the only person I’ve ever allowed myself to be vulnerable around, but it feels so natural to give in to her embrace and let her comfort me like only she can.

“They’re going to be fine,” she says, cutting right to the heart of my fear. “It’s not going to be easy going against my brothers, but yours are fighting for someone they love, and that’s what’s going to make the difference. Greed is what fuels my brothers, the need to own and control and destroy everything around them, but that doesn’t inspire any real

loyalty. I have a feeling that some of their men will run when the time comes. A lot will choose to die fighting, but I think many will run.”

“We’ll still kill them, but it’ll be easier to shoot them in the back while they’re running away,” I admit. “They don’t deserve to live, so we won’t let them.” I kiss her neck and sigh when she runs her nails over my scalp in a light massage that makes me want to shed a tear at how fucking good it feels. “I know we can take out your brothers,” I murmur against her skin, “but nothing is ever guaranteed, and there’s going to be a lot of bullets flying around. I’m not so sure this family can survive losing any of its members.”

“That won’t happen.”

“I appreciate how sure you sound, *ptichka*. I can almost make myself believe it.”

“You’re all going to live.” I smile at the steel determination in her voice. “I didn’t finally become part of a family that I love just to have it taken from me.”

I bring my mouth to hers and kiss her, not wanting to think about any of this shit anymore. We spend the rest of the day together, and she constantly surprises me with how much fun I have just hanging out with her. I’ve never met anyone like her. She makes me laugh, she’s stunningly gorgeous without making any effort to be so, she doesn’t put up with my shit, and her sex drive is equal to my own. She’s fucking perfect.

When it’s time for me to leave with Danil, she pulls me down and gives me a deep kiss that’ll have me counting down the minutes until I can get back to her. I give her ass a soft smack and her bottom lip one last suck.

“I’ll be back soon, baby.”

“You better.” She smiles and palms my cock through my jeans. “I think I’ll want another orgasm later.”

I laugh at her demanding tone. “The three I gave you this afternoon not enough?”

“No.”

“My insatiable wife,” I whisper against her lips. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you were trying to break my dick.”

She gives me a squeeze that has me biting back a groan. “I definitely don’t want to break your dick. I love it way too much to do that.”

I laugh and give her one last kiss. “Behave yourself, *ptichka*. I’ll be home soon, and then I’ll make you come as many times as you want.”

She gives me a big smile. “Deal. I’m going to work on some sketches for Simona’s nursery while you’re gone. We’re trying to come up with ideas.”

“I can’t wait to see them.” I give her a wink and run my thumb along her cheek before heading downstairs to where Danil is already waiting for me by the elevator.

“Lev’s downstairs guarding the troublemakers,” he tells me, pushing the button for the doors to open.

“Clearly we’re the most responsible men in this family.”

Danil laughs. “Yeah, I’m sure the others would wholeheartedly agree with that.”

I look over at him as the elevator descends. “Do you carry snacks, too, like Lev?”

“I do not.”

We step into the parking garage and head for the SUV. Once we’re on our way, I look over at Danil. “It’s not very responsible of you to not carry around snacks. You’re about to be a daddy. You need to step up your game. Lev’s running circles around you, brother.”

Danil laughs and checks his laptop while I pass a slower car and ease back into the right lane.

“Don’t make too much fun of me. I’m guessing you’re going to be announcing a pregnancy any day now.”

“Fuck yeah,” I say with a laugh. “I have a feeling she’s already pregnant, but I haven’t sprung the test on her yet.”

“But you’ve already bought one?”

I grin and shoot him a quick look. “Three. I figure she can pee on them all at once, and then we’ll know for sure.”

Danil laughs. “I remember when just the mention of pregnancy would make you go pale. That was what, like a month ago?”

“Stop laughing at me. I’m a changed man.”

“I’m happy for you. Simona and I both really like Katya.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty fucking amazing,” I say, grinning like an idiot. “It’s probably weird to say that I’m looking forward to killing her family, but I totally am.”

“Not weird at all,” Danil assures me. “We all are.”

It’s fully dark by the time we pull up to the guarded gate outside the Lebedev mansion. The men on duty give us a nod and let us through

without any issues.

“Security cameras all around the iron fence,” I mutter, running my eyes over everything as we drive through.

“Yeah, and I’m guessing they have enough guns and ammunition strapped to their bodies to stop anyone who tries to come through the front gate.”

“It’s not going to be enough to stop us.”

“No, it won’t be,” Danil agrees.

We both eye the monstrosity in front of us. It’s a house meant to show off and intimidate, but it just looks fucking ugly to me. Even though we have more than enough money now, growing up poor has given me a real dislike of the super rich, especially those who feel like they need to shove it in your goddamn face by dipping everything in gold.

“I can’t believe Alina is in there somewhere,” Danil says while I park near the front walkway.

“I know. The urge to kill them and search the house is very fucking strong.”

“It is, and if I thought we had a chance in hell of succeeding, I’d say we should go for it.”

“But we don’t,” I say, voicing what we both know.

Danil sighs and opens his door. “No, we don’t, so let’s get this the fuck over with so we can come back soon and kill them.”

I couldn’t agree more. We walk up the manicured path and ring the doorbell.

“Jesus Christ,” I groan when a long stream of classical music chimes inside the house. The door is quickly opened by the same woman as last time. Her eyes look even more haunted than the last time I saw her, but I look her over like I couldn’t give the slightest shit and step into the large foyer. “We’re here to see Konstantin,” I tell her.

“Please follow me. He’s waiting in his office.”

We follow her bowed head, both of us noticing her slower movements and the bruises that run up her legs and encircle her wrists, and I know we’re thinking the same goddamn thing. If this is how he treats his staff, then what the hell has he been doing to Alina? The pictures Katya drew tell a horrifying enough story, but I know there are worse things going on that not even she knows about.

The woman leads us down a hall, stopping to knock at the last door on the left. She briefly meets my eyes before turning away and focusing all her attention on the floor. Konstantin yells for her to enter, and we follow her into the office. He's sitting behind a large desk that's designed to intimidate, but he's going to be disappointed if he thinks that shit will work on us. I scan the room, noticing the gaudy artwork, the bookshelves that are filled with leather-bound classics that I'd be willing to bet good money he's never read, and the two leather chairs that are facing his desk.

Konstantin doesn't look too happy when he waves his hand at the chairs while staying seated. Before the woman can leave, he beckons her closer. I see her whole body stiffen for just a second before she walks over to him. He reaches out and slides his hand under the black skirt of her ridiculously short uniform. She winces but keeps quiet.

“Natalya has an exquisite cunt if you’d like to try her out.”

For a second, I'm too stunned to speak. I'm married to his sister, and he's offering to let me rape his maid while he watches. I'm so sick and tired of having to pretend I'm some fucked-up bastard who's perfectly fine with trafficking women. Instead of pulling my gun out and shooting the jackass like I really want to, I smile and give a soft laugh.

“No thanks,” I tell him, trying to keep the rage and hate out of my voice.

He laughs and does something with his fingers to make her wince again. “I’m glad to see my sister is keeping you so satisfied.” He turns to look at Danil. “How about you? She’ll happily take it in the pussy or ass.”

I look at the woman’s terrified face, and it’s painfully obvious that she won’t be happily doing anything.

“I’m good,” Danil says, and even though he sounds like he couldn’t give the slightest fuck about what’s happening, I know he’s beyond pissed and using all his self-control to not put a bullet in Konstantin’s head. “I thought I was meeting Casimir.” He looks at his watch. “I’ve got a few other things I need to take care of tonight.”

Konstantin smirks, but I see the flash of irritation that crosses his face before he pats the poor woman’s ass and pushes her towards the door. “Close it behind you,” he tells her, and once she’s gone, he rests his elbows on his desk and leans forward. “You’ll meet with him in a second, but first I want to know what the fuck happened to five of my men last night.”

He waits, assuming a little bit of silence is going to make us crack in front of him and confess all our sins like he's a fucking priest and it's confession time. When he grows tired of staring at our bored faces, he sighs and leans back in his chair.

"I had five men guarding the building where we hold the auctions, and last night Karel radioed in and said they were having technical issues and needed to turn the cameras off to reboot the system, and then they just fucking disappeared. When the new shift showed up this morning to relieve them, the place was empty and there was a large amount of dried blood on the floor."

The memory of last night has me craving fruit snacks, and when my stomach growls, the corner of Danil's mouth lifts up like it always does when he's fighting a smile.

"How the hell should we know what happened to them?" I ask.

"It's your territory."

"Right," I agree, "and we haven't had any issues. The Alessi family has pulled back, and we've kept everyone else in line."

"Could it be something personal?" Danil asks.

Konstantin sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "It could always be something personal. This is the last fucking thing I need right now."

"Everyone we know would've displayed the bodies as a warning," I tell him. "Unless this is a problem you brought with you from Europe."

Konstantin grabs his phone and sends a quick text. Looking at Danil, he says, "Osip's bringing Casimir down. He's trying to salvage the security footage, but so far he hasn't been able to find anything useful. I can't have any fuck-ups with this next auction. There are several diplomats who are supposed to show up for it, and there's a lot of fucking money riding on this."

I meet his blue eyes and smile. "I can promise you that you don't need to worry about next month's auction." I don't bother adding that he'll be dead long before it takes place.

"I sure as hell hope not." When he hears the door, he looks up and waves his brother in. A younger man follows behind him. He looks exactly like how I always pictured a hacker looking—pale, glasses, and looks like he'd giggle like a schoolgirl if he ever saw a pussy in real life. Danil is an oddity. The man doesn't look like a computer genius, and it's worked in his favor all his life. People constantly underestimate him, and it allows him to

get away with all kinds of shit. To prove my point, Konstantin waves a hand at Casimir and tells him to work with Danil, giving us the in we need to completely fucking destroy them.

Danil shakes the man's hand before following him out of Konstantin's office while I turn my attention back to my brothers-in-law.

"So how's Katya doing?" Osip leans against the edge of the desk and gives me a grin that makes it obvious he's not asking about her health.

"She's doing great. Thanks for asking."

He laughs while Konstantin says, "I tried to text her this morning, but she never answered."

"I'm afraid that's my fault. I dropped her phone the other day and broke it. I need to get her a new one. I just haven't had the time to do it yet. I'll let her know you tried to reach out, though."

He studies me, searching for the lie he'll never be able to detect. Katya will never have to interact with him again, not even through a fucking text.

Convinced I'm not lying, he says, "Well, tell her to get in touch when she gets her new phone. I miss having her around, and I'd like to keep in touch."

"Will do," I say, and I even manage to do it without laughing. I circle my finger around and quirk a brow like I actually give a fuck. "This is a beautiful property. How many acres do you have?"

He perks up like most arrogant bastards do when they realize it's their time to brag. "It's five acres, and I got it for a damn good price. It butts up against several acres of forest that's privately owned by a man who now lives in the UK, so no one's going to build behind us anytime soon."

"Damn. I bet it's kind of hard security-wise, though."

He shrugs. "Not so bad. We've got patrols that regularly guard the property line, and we've recently put up some cameras and motion detectors in the woods."

Osip laughs. "Add in the arsenal at the front gate and we're pretty fucking secure here."

I laugh along with them. "Yeah, I noticed they were pretty well armed when we came through. You can't be too safe. America may not have quite as many issues with organized crime like Moscow does, but you can never be too careful. I mean, your wife lives here."

He groans and shoots me a *let's cut the bullshit* look. "I think we both know I don't give a fuck about Oksana, who's most likely passed out in bed

right now after snorting too much coke. I do care about other things, though.”

“Well, your brother’s here, too,” I say, making him laugh.

“Osip can take care of himself. I’m talking about my pet.”

It takes everything I have to not react. “You mean the woman you offered me?”

“No, fuck her, I’m talking about the pet I acquired almost two years ago.”

“That’s a long time. She must be pretty damn special.”

He gives a wicked laugh that makes my blood run cold. “She is.” He lets out a sigh at some memory he’s reliving. “She was so fucking feisty when I first saw her in line to be auctioned off, a fucking spitfire that immediately got my cock hard. I’d pulled her out of line and claimed her as my own, and breaking her, Vitaly,” he says with another groan, “goddamn, it’s been the most fun I’ve ever had.”

“He’s not lying,” Osip says, grinning at his brother. “He was like a fucking kid at Christmas who refuses to share his favorite toy. I can’t say I blame him, though, she’s a fucking looker.”

“Ah, come on, you can’t tell me all this and not show her to me. Where is she?” I look around the office like she might be hidden somewhere. When Konstantin hesitates, I hold up my hands. “I promise not to touch. I just want a peek.”

“I guess a look wouldn’t hurt,” he finally says. “Danil’s going to be a while, and I’m sure my pet wouldn’t mind some visitors.”

So many small battles are going on inside me, but I remind myself that it’s the war I need to focus on. I can’t beat the shit out of him, I can’t kill him, and Danil and I sure as fuck can’t fight our way off this property with just the two of us. There’s a lot of things I can’t do right now, but I can at least get a glimpse of Alina. I can confirm that it’s really her and that she’s alive. I just hope like hell the two of us can hide our emotions when we see each other. It’s a huge fucking risk, but it’s one I have to take. The Alina I remember is whip-fucking-smart, and she’d catch on quick and know what to do. I just have to hope that she’s not so broken she’ll break when she sees me.

I follow Konstantin and Osip out of the office, memorizing the path we take through the large house. On the third floor, I’m lead down a side hallway. The two guards posted outside the last door makes it pretty

obvious where he's hiding her. They step aside when they see us, and when Konstantin unlocks the door and slips the key back in his pocket, I take a breath and try like hell to prepare myself.

I shouldn't have bothered, because nothing could ever prepare me for the sight in front of me. A dark-haired woman huddles in the corner, naked with her arms wrapped tightly around her legs, the black viper ouroboros tattoo prominent on her pale, thin wrist. Even tucked into a small ball, I can still see the bruises and scars that mark her skin. She's underweight, dangerously so, and when she hears us walk in, she lifts her head, and I nearly fall to my fucking knees. Alina's blue-green eyes stare back at me, and for one brief second, I see the recognition and desperate hope in hers before I give a barely noticeable shake of my head. She sees it, and I'm forced to watch that brief glimpse of hope die as she shuts back down right before my eyes.

Konstantin snaps his fingers, and to my absolute horror Alina gets on her hands and knees and crawls to him, stopping before his feet. Her face is flushed with embarrassment, and she keeps her eyes locked on the ground in front of her. I know she's ashamed to be seen like this in front of me, and all I want is to take off my sweater and wrap her in it and carry her back to her family, but I can't do that. I have to act like I'm enjoying this, so I bite the inside of my cheek so hard I taste blood and give Konstantin my best smile.

“I see you’ve trained her well.”

He laughs and pets her head like she’s a goddamn dog. “It took a long time to get her like this, but she finally came around.” Looking down at her, he fists her hair tight enough to force her face up to his. “Isn’t that right, pet?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers, and the sound of her voice after all this time is gut wrenching. I remember her laughing and joking around, but she never sounded like this. He’s beaten her down to nothing, and as much as I’ve told Matvey over the last two years that we can get Alina back and that she’ll be fine once we do, I’m starting to think that maybe I was wrong, that maybe fixing Alina won’t be quite what I thought it would be.

“Where did you find her?” I ask, working hard to keep my voice neutral.

He smiles but keeps his eyes on her. “My men grabbed her in Moscow. She was so fucking obstinate. She fought like a feral cat and even managed

to break a nose and scratch the hell out of another man's face. She threw her phone out the window and refused to tell us her name."

Konstantin runs a finger down her cheek. "But you eventually caved, didn't you, Nadia Nikitina."

For a moment, I'm too stunned to do anything but take my next breath. She'd used Matvey's last name as her own. By the time she was kidnapped we were all using Melnikov as our last name, but Nikitin is Matvey's real last name, and she'd taken the feminized form as her own. Alina's eyes dart briefly to mine before looking away, and I hope in that brief second she could see how fucking proud I am of her. She fought, she threw her phone away so they couldn't get any information about her, and she gave a fake name—all to protect her family. She's my goddamn hero right now.

I know there's no way in hell I'm going to be allowed to be alone with her, but I'm desperate to let her know that we're coming for her, that we've never stopped looking for her.

"You'll have to bring her to my club one night," I tell him, forcing an easy grin on my face. "My brothers would love to see how you've broken her."

Konstantin laughs and turns his head to look at me. "I don't think your brothers are into what I'm into. I heard Roman had a pet, but now he only seems interested in his wife. The same goes for your other brothers. They just marry their pets."

Alina's eyes fill with pain while Konstantin and Osip both let out a harsh laugh. I can't bear the thought of her thinking something that's not true, so I laugh and say, "Well not every brother. Matvey's stayed single."

At the mention of his name, Alina bites her bottom lip as her eyes turn glassy. I know she's fighting tears, and the last thing I want is to get her in trouble, so I keep talking, trying to direct the focus to me instead of her.

"He'd be interested to meet Nadia, though," I say. "He's a picky son of a bitch, but I'm guessing she'd catch his eye."

When I see Konstantin's jaw clench, I laugh and smack his shoulder. "Purely to admire from a distance," I tell him. "I just thought you might like to show her off a bit. Hell, if she belonged to me, I would."

He thinks about what I've said while he fists her hair again, making her watery eyes seem like it's from physical pain instead of the emotional pain that's really causing it. He's hesitant to bring her out in public, but his ego is begging him to.

"I'm not sure about Pink," he finally says. "The club is yours, but it's not as tied to what we do as the Red Viper is."

"I've worked hard to keep them separate," I agree, "but the Red Viper sounds perfect. In fact, my brothers and I were thinking about going there this Friday. It's been a while since we've gone, and truth be told," I say with a laugh, "my brothers need to let off some fucking steam. They're so tied up in wives and pregnancies, and I think they're forgetting how to have fun."

Konstantin laughs and looks over at me. "And what about you? Feeling suffocated already by married life?"

I shrug and smile. "Your sister keeps me satisfied, but," I say, forcing a laugh, "I'm not so sure I'm made for monogamy."

"God, who the fuck is?" Osip asks. "I can't imagine fucking the same pussy over and over again for the rest of my goddamn life."

I want to tell him that he could probably do it since he'll be dead in two days, but I don't. I'm too busy inwardly apologizing to my perfect wife for the shit I'm being forced to say.

"Perfect, I'll let my brothers know." Knowing I'm about to be lead out of the room, I squat down to meet Alina's eyes and give her a smile that I hope looks cold and calculating instead of miserable and heartbroken. "I'll see you very soon, Nadia. My brothers and I will be looking forward to it."

The pain in her eyes is hard to not look away from, but I don't. Seeing her in this moment is the absolute least I can do. Looking away from her misery because it hurts me isn't an option. I can't get her out of here right now like I want to, but I can let her see in my eyes the promise that we're coming back to get her.

The anguish and utter despair that hangs on her frail body scares the fuck out of me, because after all she's been through, I refuse to believe that Konstantin has truly broken her. I won't allow him the fucking satisfaction of destroying her.

Right before I stand back up, the corner of her mouth lifts up in a movement that's so small it would be easy to miss, but I recognize it immediately. It's a hint at the mischievous smirk she'd always give me when she was up to trouble, the same one I remember her giving me on her eighteenth birthday when she'd insisted on getting a drink. As quickly as it appears, it's gone, but it's enough. I know she's in there, that some part of her realizes we're coming to get her.

“Get back in your fucking corner, pet,” Konstantin yells at her, and she quickly ducks her head and scurries back to the corner she was in when we first walked through the door. The room is bare, nothing but a mattress in the corner, but something tells me she’s not allowed to rest on it. There are no blankets, no pillows, nothing to give her the slightest bit of comfort, and a part of me dies in that room when I have to turn around and walk out, leaving her naked and alone.

Once we’re back downstairs, I take the offer of a drink and quickly down it while I wait for Danil. Every second feels like an hour, but when he finally finishes up with Casimir, he takes one look at me and makes up an excuse about us needing to leave.

“What the fuck happened?” he asks as soon as we’re in the SUV and I’m pulling down the driveway.

“I saw her, Danil, and there’s a fucking change of plans. She’ll be at the Red Viper this Friday, and we’re getting her and killing every motherfucker there.”

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Chapter 15

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Katya

I'm already in bed by the time Vitaly gets home. I've been worrying nonstop about him, trying to lose myself in drawing and then in watching a movie, but nothing was working, so I just decided to lay down and wait. When I see the look on his face, I'm glad I did. I've never seen him look so haunted before, and I'm on my feet in seconds, crossing the room and wrapping my arms around him.

"What happened?"

He wraps his arms around me, squeezing me so tightly I can barely breathe, but I don't pull away. I let him hold me like he needs to. He buries his nose in my neck and takes a long, shaky breath.

"I need you," he groans against my skin. I start to ask what's going on, but he picks me up and carries me back to bed. "Please, *ptichka*. I swear I'll tell you everything, but right now I need to feel something sweet, something good, because I feel like I can't fucking breathe and you're the only thing that can help."

Rough, scarred hands trail up my thighs, pushing my T-shirt up before hooking under my panties and pulling them down. Next my shirt is ripped off my head before he quickly undresses and brings his body back to mine.

"I love you so goddamn much," he whispers against my skin, cupping one of my breasts while he positions himself between my thighs.

"I love you, too." I cup his face and kiss him. "I'm here, Vitaly. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

He slides into me with a deep, masculine groan and then his lips are on mine, and he's kissing me like he'll never be able to get enough, like he's a dying man and I'm his salvation. Every thrust of his hips is hard and deep,

but there's so much fucking love in the way he's kissing and touching me. With every caress of his fingers and every swipe of his tongue along mine, he's reminding himself that I'm here, that I'm safe, and that I'm his.

I lose myself in him just as much as he's losing himself in me, and when I come, he lets go at the same time so we can shatter together. His kiss softens, but he doesn't pull back. He keeps kissing me as he grows soft inside me. Wrapping my legs around him, I run my fingers through his hair and let him kiss me for as long as he needs.

"I hate your fucking brothers," he murmurs against my lips in between kisses. "I hate acting like a perverted jackass when I'm around them. I hate that I have to say horrible things that I don't mean and that disrespect you, and I fucking hate that I couldn't kill them tonight."

The pain in his voice has me wrapping my arms around him in a tight hug.

"I saw her tonight," he whispers, "and then I had to come here and tell Matvey that I saw her, that she was naked and too thin and covered in bruises, and then I had to tell him that she'd told them her last name was his, that as scared as she was, she'd clung to Matvey in the only way she could."

"I'm so sorry." I kiss him and hold him tighter. "I'm so sorry."

"We're killing them in two days, *ptichka*."

My body stiffens at the words. I knew it was coming, but I hadn't expected it to be so soon. I don't give a shit about my brothers, but the thought of Vitaly's life being in danger makes me feel sick.

"Will you do something with me tomorrow?"

"Anything," I quickly say. "I would do anything for you."

When he doesn't say anything, just rolls us over and pulls the blankets over my bare ass, I lift my head and meet his eyes. "You're not going to tell me what it is?"

He smiles and it almost reaches his eyes this time. "It's a surprise."

Threading his hands through my hair, he gently lowers my head to his chest. "Get some sleep, baby."

"Like this?" I laugh because he's still buried inside me.

"Like this." He gives my ass a soft squeeze. "I need you close tonight."

I kiss his chest and snuggle in against him, loving that Vitaly feels comfortable enough around me to show his vulnerable side. My eyes drift

closed as he strokes my head, playing with my hair until I can't fight sleep any longer.

The sound of Vitaly walking around our room wakes me up the next morning. As soon as he sees my eyes open, he comes over and gives me a kiss. The smile he's wearing definitely reaches his eyes this time, and I easily return it.

"You going to tell me what the thing is?" I ask, reaching my arms up for a long stretch.

His eyes run over my naked body, and he lets out a soft groan of appreciation before meeting my eyes and kneeling by the side of the bed. He kisses my stomach and nibbles on my skin before lifting his head and taking my hand.

"I want you to put your wedding dress back on for me."

"What?" It's so out of the blue that it takes me a second to process it.
"Why?"

"Because the first time you wore it, it was because you were forced to, and our wedding photos are the stuff of sad, sad nightmares. You look like you're going to burst into tears, and the one photo we have where you're looking at me, well, let's just say I'm surprised you didn't slit my throat while I was sleeping that first night."

I laugh and shake my head. "I'm sorry. I was so scared of you."

"I know, baby." He cups my face, and I lean into the rough touch of his palm that I've come to crave. "But I want happy photos of us so we can hang them on the wall. I'm tired of getting off that elevator and seeing everyone else's smiling wedding photos but not ours."

"If I had known you were such a softie, Vitaly, I wouldn't have looked so scared in those photos."

He laughs and gives my hip a soft bite. "I blame you for that. I was never soft before." He gives me a wicked glint. "And I'm never soft where it counts."

"Very true," I agree. "It's one of the many things I love about you."

He smiles and hands me my T-shirt and panties from last night and my robe. "Put these on, baby. First breakfast and then we'll get dressed for pictures. The photographer will be here in two hours."

"Photographer?"

"Well, yeah, I'm not about to just have my brothers snap photos on their damn phones. Lev is always cutting off heads, and Roman's are never in

focus.”

“Danil’s a computer genius. I’m pretty sure he could take a decent photo.”

“Oh my god, don’t you dare get him started. We’ll be stuck in a pose for hours while he tries to get everything perfect and then he’ll want to add effects. We’ll be celebrating our tenth wedding anniversary by the time he’s done and satisfied with it.”

I’m still laughing when we leave our room. The others aren’t around, so we have the kitchen to ourselves. Vitaly microwaves us some pancakes while I fix his coffee. He gives me a wink when he puts a glass of orange juice and some fresh berries in front of me. He’s suddenly become very worried about my folic acid intake, and if he thinks he’s being sly about it, he’s in for a shocker. He may as well be shoving pregnancy tests under my nose. I don’t tell him that Jolene had an extra one that she gave me the other day. I haven’t taken it yet, though. It’s hidden in our bathroom, just waiting for me to work up the nerve to pee on it.

After breakfast, Vitaly grabs the tux he wore on our wedding day and gives me a big kiss. “Come downstairs when you’re ready.”

“You’re leaving?”

His laugh comes easy when he smacks my ass and kisses the tip of my nose. “As much as I would love pictures with your *I just got fucked good and hard* hair and that sweet, loopy grin you give me after you come, I want photos that you’re not embarrassed to show our kids.”

Without waiting for a response, he gives my ass another smack and leaves the room, shutting the door behind him. I shake my head and laugh as I walk to the bathroom. My life has changed so drastically that it still shocks the hell out of me sometimes. Turning on the shower, I step under the hot stream of water, realizing how different this is from the day of our actual wedding. I’d gotten ready with a sense of dread that morning. I’d been terrified of the man I was about to marry and scared to death of what my brothers would do to me if I somehow fucked it up. I’d been expecting a monster, but Vitaly’s been my savior in every way that I needed him to be. He’s shown me what real love feels like. I had no idea how much I needed it until he freely gave his heart to me and ripped my world apart. My husband talks a big game, but he’s a giant softie when it comes to me, and I couldn’t be happier about that. I’ve been around enough assholes to last me a lifetime. I could use some sweet in my life.

I take my time getting ready, and this time when I step into my wedding dress, there's a huge smile on my face. Since we're already married, I keep the thick veil pulled back, and when I put on my heels and step out of the bathroom, Vitaly is waiting for me. His face lights up in one of his huge smiles when he runs his eyes over me.

"I thought you were going to wait downstairs."

The tux he's wearing looks just as good on him as I remember, and when he shrugs his broad shoulders, my desire to rip the buttons off his shirt and ride him hard is very, very strong.

"You certainly weren't eyeing me like that the day we got married, *ptichka*." He steps closer and cups my face in his hands. "You looked so goddamn scared when I found you in the bathroom."

"I thought you were going to have your way with me," I admit. "I'd be fine with it now, though."

He smiles, but he looks sad at the memory. "I'm sorry you were so scared and that I couldn't tell you the truth about things from the beginning."

"It's fine. It all turned out well, didn't it?"

His finger trails a soft line down my neck. "It did, baby, better than I could've ever imagined."

Reaching into his pocket, he brings out a black, velvet box. "I picked out our rings, but I understand if you'd rather choose something else."

I stop him before he can continue, clutching my fingers into a fist at the mere mention of my ring disappearing from my finger. "I love this ring."

He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it. "I'm glad you do. Even though I picked it out before I knew you, it's still the exact same one I'd choose today. It just fits you."

I look down at the beautiful pink and white diamonds, knowing he's right. It's perfect. He holds the box back out to me.

"I wanted to get you something else, though, something special to remind you that I'd marry you again in a second. I will always choose you, *ptichka*, over and over again. There's no one else I want to spend my life with. I love you, Katya."

He opens the box, showing me the beautiful diamond necklace inside. I let out a soft gasp and meet his eyes. "Just for the record, before you showed me this necklace I was already planning to say that I love you and would choose you again and again, too."

"Uh-huh," he says with a soft laugh. "I think we both know you're just using me for my dick and for the diamonds I buy you."

"Clearly. You should definitely keep both of those coming."

He gives me a sexy smirk. "That's not the only thing I'm going to keep coming."

I laugh at his corny joke while he helps me put the necklace on. Spinning me around, he leads me to the mirror, and my hands immediately reach up to touch the diamonds.

"You know I'm just kidding about the jewelry, right? I don't need any of this. I just need you."

He leans his face close to mine, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "Not joking about using me for my dick though, huh?"

I rock my ass back against him. "You know how much I love your dick. I can't apologize for that, but I promise it's not the only thing I love about you."

"Good enough for me," he says with a laugh while kissing my neck. "Behave yourself today and maybe, just maybe, you'll get what you love so much later."

"I better."

He laughs at my tone and stands back up, holding his arm out to me. "You ready to take some photos?"

I grab his arm and smile up at him. "Let's add our faces to the wall."

We walk downstairs together, and as soon as I see his brothers in their tuxes and their wives in the dresses they'd worn to our wedding, I start to get all emotional.

"Don't you dare, baby," he warns with a grin. "Happy photos, remember? If I wanted pictures of you crying, then we could've just used the originals."

"But these are happy tears," I argue.

"That's impossible to tell from a damn photo. It'll just look like you're sobbing at the idea of being my wife, and my ego can't take that."

"No, it cannot," Lev says, walking over and clapping his brother on the back before pulling me in for a hug. "We're glad you're a part of the family, Katya."

I barely have time to hug him back before I'm passed down the line, hugged and welcomed into this family that I've come to love so damn

much. I'm trying like hell to hold it together, but when the last arms to embrace me are Matvey's, I lose the fight.

"Way to go, Matvey," Vitaly says, but there's not a trace of anger in his voice.

"Sorry, brother." His gravelly voice is near my ear, and when he says in Russian, "Thank you, Katya. You helped us find Alina, and I'll never forget that," I lose the battle completely and start full-on crying.

"We're framing these photos anyway," Vitaly grumbles. "We're blowing them up and framing them right in front of the goddamn elevator so everyone can see how happy my wife is."

Matvey gives my back a soft pat before pulling away. Vitaly explained the fire to me and I know he's not crazy about physical contact and it means the world to me that he put that aside to give me a hug. I meet his dark eyes and smile.

"I can't wait to get to know her."

He gives a soft nod, the pain and sadness that he always carries around coming back into his eyes, and without another word, he steps back so Vitaly can stand in front of me.

"All right, *ptichka*, dry it up and get ready to look absolutely thrilled to be my wife."

I laugh as he gently brushes away my tears.

"You're lucky you wore waterproof mascara, because I'm serious about blowing it up and framing it."

The thought of having a huge photo of me with black streaks running down my face as I stand in my wedding dress next to Vitaly as the main focal point to anyone who steps off the elevator makes me laugh so hard I almost start crying again.

Vitaly shakes his head and mutters, "I'm not going to be able to take you anywhere, baby. You're such a handful." He looks over at Lev. "I thought you said wives were easy to control."

Lev barks out a laugh and lifts a pierced brow at Vitaly. "You're such a fucker." He looks back at his wife and holds up his hands. "I swear I never said that, *malinkaya*."

It's obvious by my husband's amused smirk that he's making shit up, and thankfully for Lev, Jolene can see it. She just laughs and shakes her head at her brother-in-law, clearly used to his tricks.

Vitaly laughs and motions for the photographer, who's been waiting patiently by the kitchen island. The man grabs his equipment and steps forward.

"We're ready when you are," Vitaly tells him. "Make sure to catch how unbelievably in love my wife is with me."

The man smiles, but the poor guy looks terrified of the tattooed Russian men in front of him. I don't know what Vitaly told him when he hired him, but whatever it was it's caused a slight tremor in the guy's hands when he grabs his camera and a tremble to his voice as he gives us instructions.

"You've scared the hell out of him," I whisper to Vitaly. "All our photos are going to be blurry now because he can't keep his hands steady."

Vitaly thinks about what I've said and then turns to the photographer. "Don't fuck these up."

The warning in his voice has me shaking my head. "That's not going to help."

Vitaly winks at me. "You don't think so? Fear is a wonderful motivator."

When I just raise a brow at him, he sighs and says in a much softer tone, "If you do well, there's a huge bonus in it for you."

The guy perks up at that, and when he gets back to work with much steadier hands, I give Vitaly a smirk of my own and whisper, "Told you so."

"Smartass," he whispers back.

Right as I look up at him and laugh, the photographer starts snapping photos. The next hour goes by far quicker than I would've thought. We have several posed shots, but it's the candid photos he keeps snapping that I really want to see. When Vitaly is satisfied that enough photos have been taken, I watch him pass an envelope to the photographer, who's now smiling like this is the best gig he's ever taken.

While he leaves, I look back at my new family. They're sitting around in formal wear, doing all of this for us when I know that they're all worried about tomorrow night. Despite that, they took the time to pose for photos so that Vitaly and I could have pictures that mean something to us.

"Thank you so much for doing this," I tell them.

"We were happy to," Emily quickly says. Her pregnant belly is pushing against her dress, and Roman's hand is resting on it. "Any excuse to dress up and feel pretty right now is fine by me. I feel like a clumsy elephant at the moment."

She laughs while Roman kisses her cheek. “You’re the sexiest goddamn elephant I’ve ever seen.”

She laughs even harder and pats his hand. “I think that might’ve sounded better in your head.”

“Nice one,” Vitaly teases him.

Roman laughs. “You know what I mean! You’re not an elephant, *solnishka*. You’re pregnant and beautiful and perfect.”

“Nice save,” Danil says with a laugh. He kisses his wife and pulls her closer while she leans her head against him. He whispers something in her ear, and when she grins and nods her head, he looks back at all of us. “Since we’re celebrating today, we wanted to let you all know that we snuck off to an ultrasound appointment this morning.”

“You did?” Jolene leans forward from where she’s sitting on Lev’s lap. When Danil and Simona keep quiet, she says, “You’re killing me. What’d they say?”

Simona laughs and looks over at Danil. “You tell them.”

He reaches inside his tux jacket and pulls out a sonogram photo.

“Good god, not this again,” Vitaly mutters. “We can’t play *spot the tiny penis* again, Danil, because you know we all suck at it.”

He laughs at my confused look. “Roman and Emily tried to get us to guess, but their son’s penis is so tiny that it’s impossible to see.”

“He’s not done growing,” Roman yells while laughing.

“So what are you having?” I ask, looking over at Simona.

She grins and says, “We’re having a boy, so you’ll be painting lots of little woodland creatures instead of pixies and pink unicorns.”

“I can’t wait.” I walk over and give her a hug as we all congratulate them. I’m already planning the rambunctious squirrels and cute raccoon family I want to put on the nursery walls.

Danil puts the sonogram photo on the fridge next to Roman’s son while Vitaly leans closer and whispers, “I wonder what we’re going to have.”

“Presumptuous,” I whisper back, making him laugh.

“Please, baby, I’ve filled you with enough cum to make it a certainty. Arrogance has nothing to do with it.”

He’s not wrong, so I just smile and pat his cheek, even though it makes him gloat all the more. The man’s insufferable, but somehow it just makes me love him all the more. The others surprise us with a cake, and after

we've all eaten way too much of it, Vitaly picks me up and carries me upstairs.

Laughing, I wrap my arms around his neck. "What are you doing?"

"Carrying my wife to bed." He gives me a wink. "I'm going to make you work up an appetite, and then we're using Dominic's gift and going to that Italian restaurant."

"I'm not even remotely hungry," I tell him.

"You know how much I love a challenge." His grin says it all, and when he lays me on the bed and lifts my dress up, I recognize the determined glint in his eyes. It's the same look he had when he made me pass out.

Keeping my lower body exposed, he slowly strips out of his tux. I watch his hands work the buttons free, revealing the intricate tattoos and tanned skin that always makes my damn mouth water. The corner of his mouth lifts up in a smirk when he sees me start to squirm. By the time he's naked, I'm more than ready for him.

Stepping closer, he trails one scarred finger up my inner thigh. The roughness of his skin mixed with the gentleness of his touch has my hips rocking for more.

"I like these," he says, dipping his finger under the lacy top of my thigh high. "And this." His finger drags along the matching white, lacy panties that I ordered just for him. "These won't last long, but they look sexy as fuck on you."

"You can't rip my undies, Vitaly."

His laugh comes easy, but he never stops stroking my slit. "Your undies? Your sexy talk needs some work, *ptichka*, and I can rip them if I want."

"But then I'll be forced to walk around without them, and you told me you'd spank my ass for that," I remind him.

"I did, yes." He leans down and kisses my inner thigh. "That's quite the mess you've gotten yourself into."

Before I can argue that I'm not the one getting myself in this mess, he hooks his fingers under my panties and rips them off with a sharp tug. My shocked yelp mixes with the sound of fabric tearing.

"That's one less pair to worry about."

I'd yell at him for ruining a pair of perfectly good panties, but he's already nibbling on my pussy lips and I no longer give a fuck. Sliding his hands under my ass, he cups my cheeks and tilts me up so he can bury his

face in my folds while keeping his eyes on mine. He licks and kisses every inch of me, and when he flicks his tongue against my aching clit, I gasp and clutch at my dress.

With his eyes on mine, he sends me over the edge, and when I start to come down, he doesn't let up.

"Vitaly," I pant, and I know he hears the warning in my voice by his innocent "Hmm?" that he gives me.

"Too much," I gasp, but he ignores me and runs his tongue over my overly sensitive clit.

He breaks contact just long enough to say, "This is the wedding night you should've had. Instead of being terrified that I was going to rape you, you should've been in a constant state of ecstasy. You should've felt nothing but pleasure, and that's what I'm making up for right now."

His fingers dig into my ass, holding me still while he goes back to devouring me like I'm the best goddamn thing he's ever tasted.

"I want your pleasure, wife," he growls, dipping his tongue into me. "I want to taste it, and I want to feel it all over my fucking face." He gives me a slow lick up my slit before circling my clit. "When we go out tonight, I'm doing it with your taste on my tongue and the scent of your pussy on my skin. Every person in that restaurant will know that you're mine."

"And everyone will know that you're mine," I tell him, running my hands through his hair when he gives my clit a soft suck.

"Only yours," he growls, giving me a harder suck that has my back arching off the bed. When he slides two fingers into me, it pushes me over the edge again. My body shakes in his grip, and I'm helpless to move. I'm helpless to do anything but take what he wants to give me, and right now he's determined to give me everything.

When another shudder racks my body, he takes pity on me. Kissing my pussy with a reverence that feels like he's worshipping me, he takes his time, and only when he's satisfied he's hit every inch of me does he lift up and reach behind me to unzip my dress. He pulls it over my head, leaving me in nothing but my strapless bra and thigh highs. My nipples strain against the white lace, and when he leans down to wrap his lips around one, I feel his pre-cum hit my stomach.

Reaching between us, I run my fingers over him, coating him in his own arousal before I start to work him from his base all the way up to his head. His deep, masculine groan vibrates against my breast as he tongues my

nipple before giving it a soft bite. Pulling the lace down, he exposes my chest and rocks his hips against my hand.

“You drive me fucking crazy.” His voice is thick with lust, and when he brings his hand to mine, guiding the head of his cock to my slit, I can see the veins sticking out along his neck and the tension in his jaw. He’s barely hanging on, and I’m expecting him to slam into me, but he doesn’t. He brings his mouth to mine and kisses me as he slowly slides into me, and it feels like pure heaven.

Our bodies connect so easily, the rhythm coming so damn naturally to us, like we were made just for the other—a perfect fit in every way. The weight of the diamond necklace rests against the hollow of my neck as he thrusts into me. Our fingers intertwine when he pins one of my hands to the bed. His other hand cups my face, deepening the kiss. I lose myself completely in Vitaly, just like I always do, and when we find our release, it’s together. He never breaks the kiss, not even when he feels my inner walls tighten around him and I feel him pulse inside me. We keep kissing as he grows soft, and as soon as he’s able to, we do it all over again.

We spend the entire day in bed, fucking and laughing and trying like hell to not think about tomorrow night. Everything is going to change tomorrow, but today is ours, and we’re determined to enjoy every second of it.

When my stomach finally growls, he gives me a triumphant grin. “About damn time, baby. You had me worried there for a second. I’m not so sure I could’ve handled another round without getting some calories in me.”

“Already can’t keep up with me?” I tease, laughing at his horrified expression.

“I can keep up, *ptichka*. I just said I needed some fuel to keep me going.”

I pat his chest and say, “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.”

His mouth drops open in surprise. “I never would’ve guessed the scared, timid woman who first said ‘I do’ to me would turn into this mouthy little hellion. I’ve created a goddamn monster is what I’ve done, a sassy one who constantly begs for my handprint on her perfect ass.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not at all what I’m begging for.”

“Oh, it is, baby. You might as well be bending over and begging for a spanking.”

I take a step back, refusing to turn around and show him my bare ass when he's got that wicked glint in his eyes and a hand that's already twitching at the thought of marking my skin.

"Going somewhere?" he taunts, taking a step towards me.

"We're going to go out to eat. Remember?"

"We have plenty of time, *ptichka*."

Before he can form a plan, I race into the bathroom, but I'm not quick enough. A strong, tattooed arm wraps around my waist, pulling me back against him.

"You can't fly away from me, little bird. I believe you said something about me not being able to keep up."

He presses against me, letting me feel the hard length of him against my ass before he grabs both my hands and presses them against the counter in front of us. Keeping his hands over mine, he gives my ear a soft nip.

"Look at me, *ptichka*."

I lift my head, meeting his heated gaze in the mirror that's now only inches from my face.

"I want you to watch me prove you wrong."

And prove me wrong he does. Twice. Both times he makes me watch, and when the force of the orgasms makes me drop my head, he fists my hair and lifts me back up again, wanting me to see the ecstasy that's written all over my face, the ecstasy that *he*'s giving me.

"Okay, okay, I was wrong," I pant as my knees threaten to give out.
"You can keep up with me."

He laughs and kisses my cheek. "Let me know if you ever need a reminder again. I'm more than happy to give it to you, sweetheart."

"I don't think I can walk." My breasts are pressed flush against the counter, and the only thing keeping me upright is the fact that he's still buried inside me and pinning me in place.

With a soft, smug laugh, he gently picks me up, holding me against his chest. "You don't need to walk, baby. You have me. I'll happily carry you into the restaurant and tell everyone that I fucked the strength right out of my wife."

The huge grin on his handsome face makes it clear that he'd have no problem doing just that. I cup his cheek and kiss him.

"I think by the time we get there I'll be okay."

"That's too bad. I was kind of looking forward to that."

“I could tell.”

When he starts to carry me to the closet, I look back at the bathroom.
“Aren’t we going to shower?”

“Fuck no. You’re going in there smelling like me, baby, and if you start to doubt my virility or my ability to make you scream my name within minutes, then the cum leaking out of your tight little pussy will be a nice reminder, don’t you think?”

He kisses me and sets me down on my side of the closet. I pull down a cute, black dress while he gives a soft groan of approval and grabs one of his black suits. He kisses my shoulder as I start to get dressed, and when we’re both ready, he pulls me against him and threads his fingers in my hair.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my skin. “You came into my life and knocked it completely on its ass and changed every single fucking thing that I thought I knew and wanted, and I’m so glad you did because I can’t imagine not having you in my life, baby.”

“I love you, too.” I hug him tighter and breathe in the familiar, comforting scent of him. “You’ve shown me how good life can be, and I don’t ever want to go back to what it was before I met you.” I shake my head at the thought. “I don’t think I’d survive it.”

He cups the back of my head and gently tilts my face up to his. “You won’t ever have to go back to that, *ptichka*. You’re mine now, and I’m never letting you go.”

His kiss is slow and sweet, every brush of his lips a promise that I will always be his and that he will always love and take care of me, and I believe him. No matter what happens, we’re in it together, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. When he threads his fingers through mine and leads me out of the closet, I smile and follow him. The truth is I’d follow this man anywhere. For once in my life my brothers did something good for me, even if it wasn’t their intention. My life led me to Vitaly, and I wouldn’t change a single thing about it, because having him is worth everything, and the rest of our lives will more than make up for the shit I’ve endured. I’d much rather have a rough beginning and a sweet ending. And ours? Ours is going to be fucking amazing.

Epilogue

Katya

The Next Morning

The early morning light pulls a pained moan from Vitaly. He pulls the covers over his head and tightens his arm around my waist.

“Headache?” I give a soft laugh and kiss the bicep that I’m using as a pillow. “How many bottles of wine did you drink? I lost count.”

He tickles my ribs and kisses the back of my head. “Someone needed to enjoy the bottomless gift from our Italian friend. I hope Dominic got a few grey hairs when he saw the bill.”

“I enjoyed it enough with the giant plate of pasta I ordered and the tiramisu we had for dessert.”

His teeth nip at the crook of my neck. “That’s not the dessert I remember.”

I blush at the memory of what all we’d done in that restaurant. “Yeah, I’ll have to remember that red wine makes you even hornier than usual.”

He snorts out a laugh and slides his hand lower, cupping my pussy in a possessive grip. “Everything about you makes me horny, *ptichka*. As soon as I see you I get hard.”

He’s not lying. I can feel the truth of his words pressing against my ass crack. The pad of one finger lightly brushes my clit before he rests the palm of his hand on my lower stomach.

“You want to tell me why you refused even a small sip of alcohol last night?”

“You were drinking enough for the both of us.”

I laugh when he quickly flips me onto my back and cocoons me beneath his naked body. He grazes his nose down my cheek while he pins my wrists to the bed.

“Baby, if you don’t tell me what I want to know, then I’m going to pick you up and carry you to the toilet and shove the pregnancy test between your legs until you have no choice but to pee.”

“You wouldn’t,” I say, hoping like hell he actually wouldn’t do that, but I know the truth of it before he even answers me with a wicked laugh.

“Fucking try me. I’ve got all day. I’m guessing you’ll give in long before I will.”

“You have a pregnancy test just ready and waiting?”

He lifts his head and meets my eyes. “Three, actually.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Are you serious?”

The soft shrug of his shoulders gives me a tiny peek at the vulnerable side of Vitaly that I’m guessing no one ever sees but me.

“I wasn’t sure which one was the best, and I figured three is better than one.” Letting go of my wrists, he kisses his way down my body, stopping when his mouth is on my stomach. “You’re killing me, baby. Did you take a test?”

“I did,” I whisper, reaching down to run my fingers through his dark hair.

“And?”

I smile at his eager tone and the impatient look he’s giving me.

“And you’d better be safe tonight and come home to me because I have no desire to raise our baby alone.”

The smile he gives me lights up his whole face. Hangover forgotten, he laughs and covers my stomach in kisses. “I knew it,” he murmurs against my skin. His eyes meet mine when he says, “We’re going to have a baby.” He laughs and adds, “And I’m not freaking out.”

“Are you really okay?” I search his face for any clue that he might be faking his excitement, but the look on his face is one of pure joy.

“I’m so fucking happy.” His fingers graze my skin, the rough scars reminding me how fragile and precious life is, and I make a promise to myself that I’ll never take one second of our life together for granted. “I never thought I’d want to be a daddy, but now all I can think about is how excited I am to start a family with you.”

He slowly kisses his way up my body.

“I can’t wait to see your body change with the pregnancy. You’re going to look so beautiful carrying our baby, *ptichka*.” He lifts his head and gives me another big smile. “And we already have a rocking chair.”

“We do.” I laugh at his excitement.

“I can do late-night feedings so you can sleep. We can get you one of those funky breast-pump things and fill a bunch of bottles.”

“I’m not about to argue with that. I have a feeling I’m going to be exhausted.”

He cups my face and kisses me gently. “I’ll help you in any way I can, baby. We’re doing this together. My dad didn’t give a shit about me, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to be like him. Our baby is going to know they’re loved from their very first breath. You two are everything to me.”

I deepen the kiss as he parts my thighs and slowly slides into me. “Come back to us, Vitaly,” I whisper against his lips. “Whatever the hell it takes, keep yourself safe and come back to us.”

“Always, *ptichka*.”

Our bodies find a slow, languid rhythm. Every stroke feels like it lasts an eternity, hitting me right where I need him to until all I feel is an overwhelming bliss that blankets my body and leaves me breathless. He’s gentle with me, taking his time and running his fingers over my stomach, reminding me with every touch of the tiny life we’ve created.

I’ve never felt so utterly consumed in my life. Vitaly doesn’t just fuck me; he possesses every goddamn inch of me. He worships me, but at the same time I worship him. There isn’t a hierarchy in our marriage. We both fall before the other, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. My husband owns me, body and soul, but I own him just as fully. All the hate I thought I felt for him when I first learned we had to marry has been replaced with a love that continues to amaze me. It’s beautiful and blinding and the sweetest thing I’ve ever felt, and I’m never letting it go.

When we’re both spent, Vitaly rolls us over so I can rest my head on his chest. I kiss his magpie tattoo while he strokes my hair.

“For life, *ptichka*,” he whispers, making me smile because he remembers what I told him about the birds and why I love them.

“For life,” I agree, because there could never be anyone else for me but him. “What time are you leaving tonight?”

“Nine.”

There are so many things I want to say and ask, but I don't. I stay quiet while his fingers run through my hair, but he senses how worried I am anyway.

"I promise I'm coming back to you. You're my wife, *ptichka*, my *pregnant* wife, and I will always find my way back to you. You know how dangerous this life is, and I'm not going to lie to you and say this is the only time you'll worry about me, but please try not to."

He gives a soft laugh and kisses my head. "I'm actually pretty damn good at what I do."

"I know you are, but I'll still worry. I can't help it. I love you too much not to."

"It'll be nice having someone to come home to. I can't wait until there's a cute little toddler running over to greet me."

I smile at the image and kiss his chest. Vitaly may not be able to give me a crime-free life, but I always knew I was never going to have one of those. What he does give me more than makes up for the times I'll worry about him. I focus on the steady beat of his heart and imagine the future that I never once dreamed I could have.

* * *

Vitaly

I look down at my wife's peaceful face, knowing she's going to be pissed about falling asleep. She's worried about tonight and wants to spend every second with me until I have to leave, but she gets sleepy after multiple orgasms, and I'm afraid I wore her out again. I smile at the memory of her in the shower, her perfect ass in my hands as I held her against the tiled wall and slammed into her until she screamed my name. Fuck, just the memory of her inner muscles clenching around me has me getting hard again. God, she drives me fucking crazy.

My eyes drift over her stomach before I pull the covers up to keep her warm. I can't believe I'm going to be a daddy, and I still can't believe how goddamn giddy the thought makes me. Smiling, I kiss her forehead and tuck her in before leaving our room and heading downstairs.

I find Matvey in his room, pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city below. Sunset is still a few hours away, and soon the view will be lit up by the skyscrapers in the distance. My eyes scan his room, noticing the way he's mixed Alina's things with his own. He brought most of her stuff with us when we came to America, and he's always kept everything out, ready and waiting for her when she comes back.

“You doing okay?”

He stops and turns his head to look at me. “I can’t sit still.”

I watch him start pacing again, his hands clenching and unclenching with every step. “I see that.”

“What if he doesn’t bring her?”

“He will. He wants to show her off, and even if he doesn’t, it won’t change anything. We’ll just do the original plan and get her at the mansion. Either way, we’re getting her back tonight.”

He runs a hand through his hair and then scratches at the stubble he hasn’t bothered to shave. “Tell me everything again.”

I sigh and sit on the edge of his bed. He’s going to see everything for himself tonight, so there’s no point in lying. I still hate to make him hear it, though.

“She’s not in good shape, but it could be a lot worse. She’s too thin, and she has a lot of bruises.”

“She was naked?” he asks, even though he knows the answer already.

“She was.”

“And he made her fucking crawl?”

“He did.”

His dark eyes meet mine. “And she really gave him my last name?”

“Yeah. She tossed her phone out so they couldn’t find out anything on us, and she took your last name.”

“Do you really believe she’ll be okay after all this?”

I think about it while he paces, and knowing that he deserves nothing less than the truth, I tell him, “I’m not sure, Matvey. She’s been badly abused for two years, and that’s something that’s going to be incredibly difficult to fully recover from, but I saw glimpses of the old Alina, and that makes me think that one day she’ll be able to heal from this. She perked up at the mention of all of you, and when she briefly thought that you’d married, she’d looked devastated and started crying.”

Matvey groans and turns to face the window. “Thank you for telling her I hadn’t. I can’t stand the thought of her thinking for one second that I could ever be with someone else, that I could’ve forgotten about her and moved on. Fuck, that was never going to happen.”

“When I told her that my brothers would be very interested in seeing her, she gave me the tiniest smirk. You know the one she always used to give when she was up to no good?”

Matvey gives a soft laugh. “Yeah, I remember. She gave me that look when I pulled her out of that damn bar on her birthday. I told her I needed to get her home and that she wasn’t ever going out in public dressed like that again. She’d given me that smirk and said if I didn’t want her to wear it, then I’d have to take it off her myself.”

I laugh because I can easily picture Alina putting her foot down and forcing Matvey to act on his very obvious feelings towards her.

“She’s been in love with you for so goddamn long. She wanted that dress just so she could get your attention.”

“She didn’t need to dress like that to get my attention. She’s always had it, even if it did change over time. I don’t know how in the hell she went from being Roman’s little sister to being the woman I couldn’t get out of my damn head, but she did it, and it’s been that way ever since. She’s the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

He gives a harsh laugh and shakes his head. “Fuck, brother, she’s the only woman I’ve ever allowed to touch me. It doesn’t bother me when she does it. With everyone else, it’s like bugs crawling on my goddamn skin. I can’t fucking stand it.”

“We’re getting her back, Matvey. Tonight.”

He nods and looks over his shoulder, turning his body just enough to see me better. “No matter what happens tonight, promise me you’ll get her out, even if it means leaving me behind.”

I meet his dark eyes, knowing there’s only one answer he’ll accept. “I promise, but it’s not going to happen. We’re getting out together, all of us.”

“Not good enough. This isn’t like the fire, Vitaly. This time I want you to promise me you’ll let me go, that you’ll save her and yourself instead. Your wife is pregnant, and she needs you.”

When I raise a brow at him, he just shrugs. “You’re fucking busting at the seams with the news, and I know it’s killing you to not scream it from the rooftop that you impregnated your wife.”

“I’m not that bad,” I say in my own defense.

“Yes, you are.”

I laugh. “Okay, maybe I am, and yes I’m thrilled that my powerful cock got my wife pregnant in what has to be record-fucking-time.”

A faint hint of a smile crosses his face. “So promise me then.”

I squeeze the back of my neck and let out a heavy sigh before meeting his eyes again. “I promise I’ll do everything to make sure Alina gets out.” When he raises a dark brow at me, I add, “No matter what.”

When he’s convinced I’m telling the truth, he gives a soft nod and turns back to the window. He may be satisfied with that, but I’m not, so before I leave, I add, “But we’re all getting out alive, Matvey. We started this together, and we’re ending it together. A bunch of fuckers are going to die tonight, but it’s not going to be us. I won’t fucking allow it.”

“You always were a stubborn bastard,” he mutters.

“Goddamn right,” I say, leaving as he gives a soft laugh.

I head back upstairs to my wife. Whatever time I have left, I want to spend it with her. My *ptichka* flew into my life and knocked me right on my ass, and I’m so fucking glad she did. I’ll happily admit how wrong I was, but the truth is that I never wanted a wife and family because I hadn’t met her yet. No other woman ever tempted me like she does. I had no problem letting them walk away, but the thought of Katya leaving and never being able to see her again makes me feel like I can’t fucking breathe.

My wife has me completely and utterly whipped, and I couldn’t be happier about it. She’s brought me to my knees, but it’s not such a bad place to be. It’s easier to worship her from this position, and when my face is buried between her legs, she makes the sweetest fucking music. Wanting to hear it again, I smile and step into our room. She’s kicked off the covers and spread her legs like she’s been expecting me.

“Perfect,” I whisper, stepping towards the bed. I wonder how many times I can make her scream my name before I have to leave.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it, and Matvey's story is coming soon!

In case you missed the first three books in the series, you can get them here!

[Paved in Blood](#)

[Paved in Venom](#)

[Paved in Rage](#)

In the meantime, please keep reading to get a free bonus epilogue—the Italian restaurant scene—and to find out about my other spicy Bratva books!

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Thank You!

I hope you enjoyed Katya and Vitaly's story. I can't wait to hear what you all think of it!

If you have the time, I'd be so grateful if you could leave a review. Every review helps my books get seen by more people, so even if it's just a star review, it really means the world to me!

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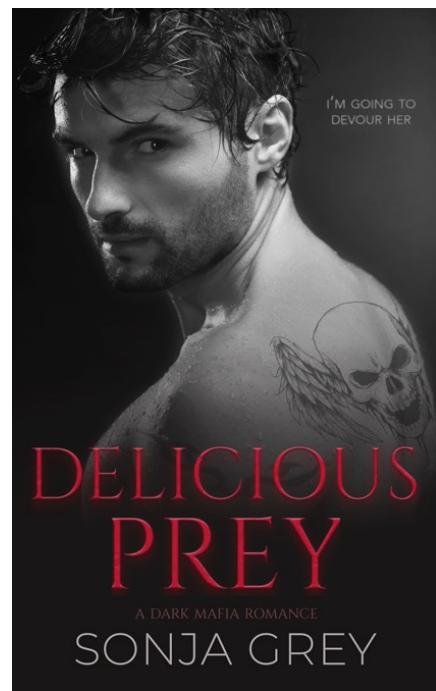
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Delicious Prey

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A Dark Hitman Standalone Romance



[Delicious Prey](#)

**It was my testimony that put him away for life,
but now he's escaped and standing in my bedroom.**

Lydia:

Kirill Chernikov is a deadly hitman for a powerful Bratva, and it's my eyewitness testimony that puts him away for life.

He's the monster who killed my dad...at least I think he is.
The truth is I didn't see his whole face that night.
I saw a tall man with a powerful, deadly build, and one hell of a chiseled jaw.
The police convinced me it was Kirill, and he's the one I pointed out in the courtroom.
After he was sent away, I thought it was over, but it's only just begun.
Turns out he's a little, I mean a lot, obsessed with me.
He sends me letters from prison, has someone watching me at all times, and tells me I'm not allowed to date anyone.
I'm his and only his.
I should be disgusted.
I'm not.
He makes me want things I shouldn't, and when he escapes, I'm the first thing he comes for.
He makes it clear that he won't be spending another night away from me ever again.
He's a man who doesn't like to be disobeyed.
And he's decided I'm his.

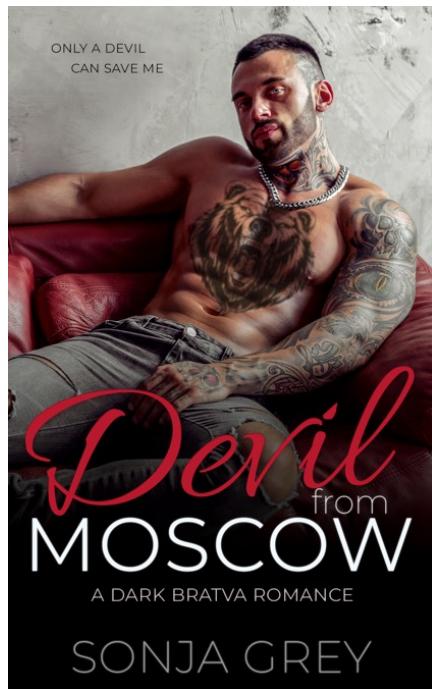
Kirill:

I've spent my life building a reputation that ensures everyone fears me.
I have no attachments. No one gets close.
But all that changes when I see Lydia.
I can't get her out of my head.
I'm an obsessed man with nothing but time.
I may be in prison now, but I'll be escaping soon, and when I do, I'm coming for her.
Once she's in my arms, I'm never letting go of my delicious prey.
I'm going to devour her piece by piece.

Devil from Moscow

OceanofPDF.com

Medvedev Bratva



Devil from Moscow
3 books in series—series complete!

I never expected to fall for a devil.

Nina:

You know the story where the hero comes in and saves the day, rescuing the heroine right in the nick of time?

This isn't that story.

Instead of a knight in shining armor, he's a sexy, tatted-up Bratva boss with a reputation for being brutal and fierce.

Vasily finds me after I've already been brought to my lowest—broken by cruel men until I barely recognize myself.

He doesn't offer me salvation.

He offers me protection and revenge.

And I gladly take it.

Because I don't need a knight in shining armor.

I need a villain who doesn't mind getting his hands dirty, a man who will make those bastards pay for what they did to me.

I never expected to fall for the devil with blood on his hands.

I never expected to crave the comfort of his powerful body.

But our arrangement quickly turns into something more as he teaches me what real pleasure feels like, and soon I'm addicted.

Vasily:

When I first saw her, she was broken, alone, scared.

I couldn't leave her, so I did the only thing I could do.

I claimed her as my own and gave her the protection of my name.

She knows who I am, knows my reputation and the bloody stories they tell about me.

But she's not the one who needs to fear me.

It's all the men that hurt her who need to be scared.

Because I'm coming for them.

One by one I'm going to take down every single person who dared to hurt what's mine.

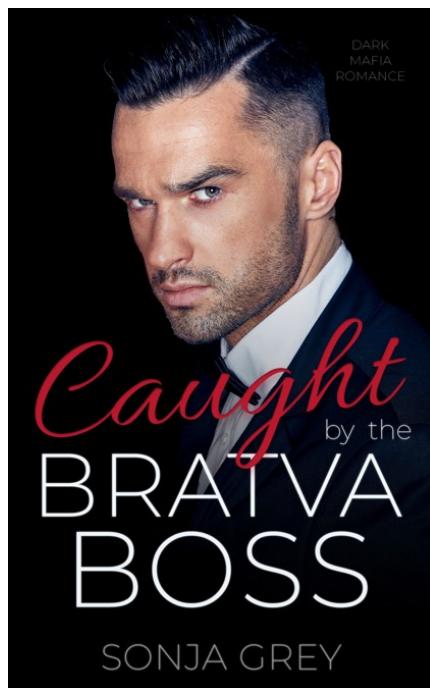
Because Nina *is* mine.

She was mine the second she wrapped her arms around me and begged me for help, and I'm never letting her go.

Caught by the Bratva Boss

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Fedorov Bratva



[Caught by the Bratva Boss!](#)
3 books in series—Series Complete!

**Mikhail Fedorov is the most powerful Bratva boss in town,
and I've just broken into his house.**

Charlotte:
This was supposed to be an easy score.

In and out.

No harm, no foul.

But when Mikhail catches me red-handed and wraps those strong arms around me, telling me in his sexy accent that I picked the wrong damn house to rob, I know my goose is cooked.

I expect the police and a future behind bars,
but this Bratva boss has other plans for me.

Locked in his house with no way to escape, the tension between us builds to the breaking point.

He taunts me, pushes all my buttons, and leaves me wanting so much more.
The only question is which one of us is going to break first.

Mikhail:

No one steals from me and lives, but the beautiful thief I've just caught has me rethinking that credo.

She's a scared little rabbit before the wolf, but I can't let my sweet bunny just walk away, not after she realizes who I am and what I've done.

And especially not after I get a taste of just how sweet she really is.

No, I'm keeping her, whether she likes it or not.

Russian Boxing Club Series

If you'd like more age gap, steamy romances, then please check out the Russian Boxing Cub series! It's an interconnected series, but they can be read in any order.

Forbidden Age Gap!
[My Russian Obsession](#)

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[My Russian Temptation](#)

Second Chance Age Gap!
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About the Author

Just like her last name, Sonja loves morally grey alphas with a hidden heart of gold. She loves strong men with mile-wide soft spots for the women they love and who will stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She writes mainly dark mafia steamy romances where the lines between good and bad blur into a beautiful, sexy shade of grey.

Zero cheating and HEAs are always guaranteed!

She can be reached at sonja@sonjagreyaauthor.com



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